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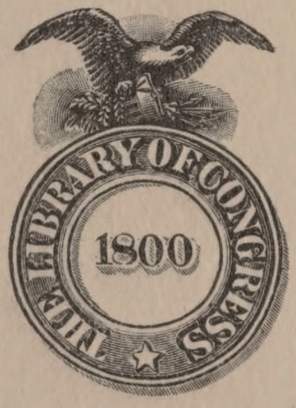
MARIAN WARNER WILDMAN



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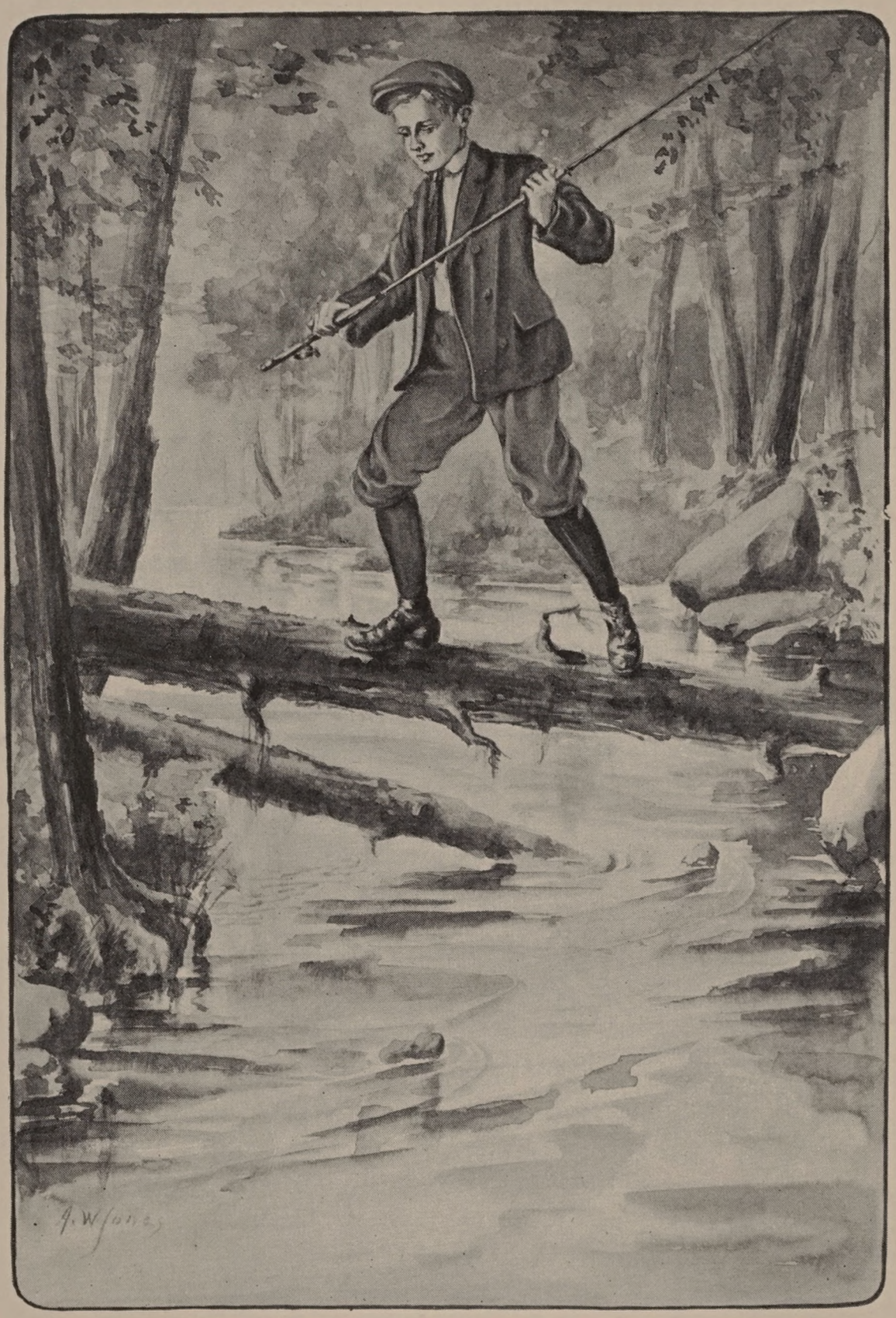

"JERRY CROSSED HIS PRECARIOUS BRIDGE."

WHAT ROBIN DID THEN

The Story of a Sierran Home

BY

MARIAN WARNER WILDMAN

BOSTON
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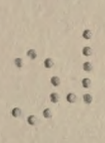

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To My Brother and Sister

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What Robin Did Then

CHAPTER I

NORTH WINDS

"ONE — two — three — four — five!" counted Jerry, as the little bronze clock struck the hour. "Five o'clock, and Robin isn't here yet! She must find Mr. Smedley and his stuffy old office mighty pleasant."

Don glanced out of the window. The winter night was fast setting in, dark and gloomy. It had been snowing in a wet, rainy fashion all the afternoon, and the sidewalks would be slushy and disagreeable enough.

"Did Robin wear her overshoes, Jerry?"

"Don't believe so. It was sunny when she left this morning."

"Guess I'll run down with them and meet her. It's a nasty evening."

"Let *me* go!" yawned indolent Jerry, curling up more snugly than ever in the big sleepy-hollow chair.

"Oh, no — I'll have pity on your tender youth!

But I say, Jerry, stir your old bones and freshen up a bit before we get here. She'll be tired to death, anyway, and this room looks like — like — I'm sure I don't know what it *does* look like!" finished Don, helplessly.

"Like a room in which you and I have kept house for just one day," suggested Jerry. "Run along, Donnie — I'll do the parlor-maid act."

The front door of Mrs. Perry's select family boarding establishment had closed behind Don with a boyish slam before Jerry began to untwist the long legs that had been stowed away under him in a wonderful fashion of his own. Once up, however, he stirred about with considerable energy, regulating furniture, tossing newspapers and magazines into the closet, and kicking various and sundry "traps" into the dark seclusion of the corner behind the sofa. He poked the grate fire and put on a big chunk of soft coal, which blazed and sputtered cheerfully. He brushed the hearth and lighted the gas. Finally he brought a pair of worn little slippers and a pretty red dressing-gown from the adjoining bedroom and put them by the fire to warm for Robin.

"Nice little sis!" remarked Jerry aloud, patting the red gown affectionately. Then, with a huge sigh of relief and conscious virtue, he sank into his chair and reached for his book. While he is absorbed in "The Last of the Mohicans," suppose we slip downstairs and follow Don.

Brrrr — what a cold night it is! The damp chill strikes straight to one's bones. The lights of the city street are duplicated everywhere on the wet, black pavement. The snow is still falling, but the flakes are dry and fine, and the moisture is freezing treacherously underfoot.

Don turned up his coat collar and thrust his hands into his pockets as he trudged down the street, ever on the lookout for his sister among the crowds of hurrying people he met.

Just as he was turning into the vestibule of the building that held the law offices of Smedley and Smedley, he heard a brisk "Good night, Miss Roberta!" above, and then the sound of light steps coming down the marble stairs. Stepping back out of sight, he began to sing softly:—

> "'The north winds do blow,
> And we shall have snow,
> And what will poor Robin —'"

but that is as far as he got, for a quickly stifled little sob caught his ear and stopped the teasing words on his lips.

"Oh, Don, how good of you to come!" cried Robin, trying to speak very cheerfully. "And my rubbers! I'd quite forgotten I didn't have them. Hasn't it been a horrid day? What have you and Jerry been doing?"

She talked bravely all the time Don was putting

on her overshoes and throwing about her shoulders the golf cape he had brought. But she failed to make him forget.

"What were you crying about?" he asked sternly, as soon as they were on the street together.

"Don't ask me now, Don, dear! I'll tell you all about it to-night when I've had my supper and rested a bit. I'm *so* tired!"

"Poor little sister!" and Don drew Robin's mittened hand protectingly under his arm; "I'll not ask a question till you say the word."

Robin looked up at him gratefully, feeling, as she often did, that her sixteen-year-old brother was older than she instead of three years her junior. Jerry was her boy, her dear, jolly, light-hearted, lazy, larky boy; but it was on Don that she had learned to lean since their father's death, some weeks before. As for both Don and Jerry, there was no one in the world to them like Robin, big sister and merry comrade in all the frolics of an unusually happy childhood; comforter and home maker when they were left motherless; and truest friend and confidante now that the three were quite alone in the world, save for each other.

"Run on upstairs, Sis," said Don, as he followed her into the dimly lighted hallway of Mrs. Perry's establishment. "I'm going to ask if we can't have our supper in our own room."

"It isn't necessary, Don," protested Robin, "and you know how cross it always makes her."

"Do you think I'm afraid of any woman's crossness?" asked superior Don. "Guess I know how to manage her all right!"

And manage her he did, by a little judicious wheedling, pathetic references to Robin's weariness, and a handsome offer to sweep all her walks next morning if it should have snowed enough over night to make sweeping necessary. A half-hour later he appeared at the door of the little parlor with triumph on his face and a huge tray in his hands.

"Clear the decks for action!" he shouted, which order Jerry proceeded to obey by summarily dumping the contents of the table into the lap of the sofa. Don deposited his burden carefully, while Jerry eyed the tray with suspicion.

"Steak just warmed through, and potatoes fried to charcoal! Wish I had the running of this confounded boarding-house! You seem to find my remark very amusing," he added with freezing dignity, in reply to Don's hoot of derision; "but just you wait and see! I can't uncook the potatoes, but I *will* cook the steak."

"Shall we let him spoil our supper for us, Robin?" objected Don.

"He can't make it much worse than it is. That steak *is* pretty raw."

"It averages better with the potatoes as it is now. I say, Jerry, what are you going to do when that string catches fire?"

But Jerry was too much engrossed to listen. First

he securely fastened a fork to the end of the poker by means of a bit of cord. Then he cut the meat into three pieces and thrust one of them upon his improvised broiler. Robin and Don looked on with interest as the juicy morsel sputtered and browned deliciously over the red coals.

"There!" declared Jerry, at last, breaking his stony silence as he withdrew the smoking meat and examined it lovingly. "Just one more sizzle and it's done, not too rare and not too ——"

Alas and alas! The one more sizzle proved to be one sizzle too many, for the string which held the fork and poker together concluded to sizzle too, and the next Jerry knew, there was a great hissing and blazing in the grate, and he was holding a forkless and meatless poker over the coals.

"I told you so!" cried Don, meanly, seizing the tongs and rushing to the rescue. He managed to save Mrs. Perry's fork before it was quite melted, but the meat was only a melancholy cinder when he held it aloft, and a most unsavory odor filled the room.

"Never mind," said Robin, smiling into Jerry's mournfully surprised face. "There are two pieces left, and we can fill up on bread and butter and tea. We must hurry, too," she added, "for I've a number of things to talk over with my boys to-night." Her face had grown suddenly very sober, and Don remembered the little sob he had heard on the stairway. Even Jerry felt that there was trouble

in the air and looked anxiously from Don's puzzled face to Robin's grave one.

The unappetizing meal was eaten in silence, and it was a relief to all three when the tray, safely deposited in the dumb-waiter, had descended to Mrs. Perry's kitchen.

"Now let's hear the worst and have it over!" said Don, settling Robin comfortably in the sleepy-hollow chair, and placing a hassock for himself at her feet. Jerry reclined on the sofa, luxuriously surrounded by pillows and afghans. Outside, the shutters were rattling in the rising wind, and every now and then there came a gusty dash of sleet against the window. Within, for a little while there was silence, except for the murmur of the fire and the ticking of the little bronze clock. Then Robin began.

"Do you think you would mind very, very much if we were poor?"

"*How* poor?" asked Jerry, discreetly.

"So it's money that's bothering you, is it? How bad is it, Robin? If you can stand it, I guess we can!" and Don smiled up at his sister.

"It's pretty bad."

"Will Don and I have to give up college?" asked Jerry, with poorly concealed eagerness. The others laughed in spite of themselves, for Jerry was a notoriously sorry failure as a student of any more difficult books than those of Cooper and Scott, Kirk Munro and Captain Mayne Reid.

"I'm afraid it means giving up college and a good deal more, Jerry. It means—oh, I may as well blurt it out at once, though Mr. Smedley took hours to break it to me! We haven't a thing in the world except five hundred dollars in the Central National, and a worthless bit of real estate somewhere in California, thousands of miles away. Mr. Smedley has investigated that enough to know that we couldn't sell it if we tried; or, if we could, that it would bring almost nothing."

"But, Robin," began Jerry, staring at her with his dark eyes very wide open, "what's become of our money? We've always had plenty. Has some bank busted or something?"

"No, dear, no bank has 'busted,' nor has any one robbed us. It's a long story, but a perfectly simple one."

"I see it all now," put in Don, slowly. "I see it now, though I've been such an idiot that I've never thought much about it before. Father's long sickness, and our coming to the city to be near the good doctors, and all our expenses going on without a penny being earned—oh, it's plain enough! Why didn't you tell us how things were going, Robin? Jerry and I could have left high school and done something to help. You oughtn't to have stood all of the worry alone."

"I didn't know myself how bad it was, Don. Indeed, Mr. Smedley himself says he has hoped that when the estate was settled something more would

be left. But there were stocks that had lost their value, and taxes that hadn't been paid, and accounts that had stood so long they couldn't be collected. You know papa was always too kind to make people pay him if they were ever so little hard up."

"I guess the truth of it is that a splendid doctor isn't likely to be a very good business man," said Don. "How about debts, Robin?"

"They are all paid. I told Mr. Smedley to see that that was done, whether there was anything left or not. That's what father would have wanted us to do. I knew we could get along some way."

"Of course!" cried Jerry, heartily. "You're a brick, Robin, and Don and I will stand by you to the last! I'll leave school to-morrow and find a place, and ——"

"As to-morrow is Sunday I think I'd wait, dear. And I don't mean that you and Don shall give up school unless it becomes quite necessary."

"But, Robin," said Don, who had been thinking hard, "we can't live more than a few months on the little money we have. We'll *have* to pitch in and earn some!"

"I had thought that I might get music pupils, for one thing."

"What you could earn that way wouldn't pay Mrs. Perry, even, let alone clothes and car fares and things."

"I know, Don; and I think we ought to find a

cheaper place to board. We could, you know. Or perhaps we might find two or three rooms somewhere and do our own cooking. Jerry could broil beefsteaks then to his heart's content!"

"Provided we could afford to keep him supplied," amended Don. "I don't believe keeping house would be so very much cheaper, Robin. Rents are so high and ——"

"Oh, I know it—I know it!" cried poor Robin. "Haven't I been over and over it all in my mind? Oh, how I wish we were back in dear old Summerville, in the home that isn't ours any more!"

"If father were there!" said Don, very low, stroking his sister's hand.

"And Chrissie — good old Chris! Wouldn't you like a hunk of Chrissie's gingerbread right now, Don?" cried Jerry, with melancholy enthusiasm.

"*Please* stop, boys!" Robin's voice was full of tears. "It never can be any more. Father and mother are dead, the old place is sold, and Chrissie is gone. All that's left for us is to be brave and hopeful and make a new home for ourselves, here or somewhere. So long as we have one another, we can get along, can't we?"

"As long as Jerry and I have such a good little sister we ought to be able to stand most anything. But I'm afraid it will be rather hard to make much of a home for ourselves here in this big city, with five hundred dollars for capital!"

It was not like Don to speak so gloomily, and

Jerry, from his place among the sofa pillows, could see the discouraged tears gathering slowly under Robin's long lashes. It was with the sole idea of diverting her that he cried cheerfully:—

"I have it! Let's emigrate to California and squat on our real estate!"

The moment he had made this proposition, Jerry realized that it was a startlingly attractive one.

"Why not?" he demanded defiantly, though no one had said a word.

Don looked up at his sister inquiringly.

"Why not?" he echoed, with suppressed excitement in his tone.

"Oh, boys, it's so far!"

"We've money enough to get there," replied Don.

"But once there, what would we do?"

"Strike gold in our back yard, of course," replied Jerry. "They always do in California."

"At any rate, there wouldn't be any rent to pay, and we'd be living on our own soil. It would be sort of like home. And we could surely get work of some kind to do. Where is our property, Robin? Are there any buildings on it?"

After all, Robin was only a girl, and she found herself, in spite of her expressed conviction that it was all nonsense, growing as interested as the boys.

"It's a little farm, lying along the banks of the Mercedes River, 'way up somewhere in the Sierra

Nevada foothills. It's good land if it were cultivated, but scarcely any one does cultivate up there, Mr. Smedley says. There's nothing going on but mining. There is one mine close by — 'Twenty Rattles' — did you ever hear such a name?"

"But what about our place?" recalled Don.

"Mr. Smedley says some man from San Francisco took it out as a homestead claim, and built a house to live in. He liked to hunt and fish, and spent a good deal of his time there for a few years. Then he got tired of it and sold out cheap—he'd got his title by that time, you understand. Some eastern capitalist bought it up, thinking there might be gold along the river bed, but there wasn't, and so the property was abandoned and left to rack and ruin. Then papa got hold of it—I don't just remember how, but Mr. Smedley knows. It had something to do with a bad debt and a mortgage. Of course papa never saw the place. For a long time he thought nothing about it; but about seven or eight years ago a letter came to him from an old uncle of his — Jonathan Sturtevandt. The letter asked if Uncle Jonathan might live on papa's ranch, paying the taxes as rent. Of course papa said yes. He had never seen Uncle Jonathan, but he knew about him. He was one of the men who went to California in the gold rush of forty-nine, and he never came back East. The last Mr. Smedley knew of him he was still living on the place. Now you know as much as I do."

Jerry was sitting up at last, his wavy black hair

in rampant disorder from the pillows, and his eyes ablaze with excitement.

"Why, Robin!" he cried, "it's the very thing! A house and a ranch and an uncle waiting for us, pining for us; and you even thought of staying here to give music lessons and starve by inches! 'Westward ho!'—*I* say. What's your opinion, Don?"

"I'll admit it sounds terribly jolly, but I suppose we ought to consider that while we've got money enough to take us there, we haven't enough to bring us back. We'd have to stay, willy-nilly."

"It will be 'willy,' never you fear! Tell him so, Robin! Say you want to—I know you do!"

"It would be too important a step to decide upon recklessly," said Robin, trying to be very judicious and calm. "I might speak to Mr. Smedley."

"Oh, bother Mr. Smedley! It's our money and our ranch, and if we want to spend the first getting to the second, whose affair is it but ours? Let's decide to-night!"

It was evident that Jerry was afraid of the sober second thought, and wanted to get matters settled at once. But Robin stood fast, Don backed her nobly, and Jerry was compelled to go grumbling to his little hall bedroom with no more satisfaction than the assurance that his plan should be considered.

To avoid the suspense which tortured the poor boy for the next few weeks, we will skip the long days of planning and doubting and discussing; of earnest consultation with the senior partner of

Smedley and Smedley; of studying overland railway guides and searching libraries for books on California. The end of the whole matter was as Jerry had openly entreated and his brother and sister had privately hoped it might be. The Arnold family decided to emigrate. And since the little fund of money grew smaller with every day they lingered, the date of departure was set as near as possible. There were various business matters to be settled; a week's visit back in Summerville, the dear old New England village that had always been home to Don and Jerry and Robin; and then, soon after an unusually lion-like March had come ramping in, the great day arrived.

Tickets were purchased, trunks were checked, good-bys said to their few city acquaintances, and then—"Westward ho!" As the train steamed out of the station, the orphans caught a last glimpse of kind Mr. Smedley, waving his handkerchief in farewell. Then the friendly flicker vanished. The old life lay behind them — the new lay far ahead.

CHAPTER II

"WESTWARD HO!"

"I NEVER saw anything like it," remarked Jerry, plaintively.

"What's the trouble now?" asked Robin, withdrawing her eyes from the fleeting expanse of gray desert and smiling at her brother's puckered face.

"It's the seasons. I can't get them straightened out. When we left New York it was winter. When we were in Chicago it was just beginning to be spring. Then it was winter again on the prairies, and spring again at Denver. After Denver we climbed right up into January, but when we got to Salt Lake City there were orchards in blossom and meadow-larks singing like split."

"Only you wouldn't have known them for meadow-larks if you hadn't seen them. They sounded more like bob-o-links," put in Don.

"And here we are now," Jerry went on, "where it doesn't seem to be any time of year at all. I'm all mixed up. I don't know what year it is, or what month, or anything!"

"You'll be worse mixed before you reach the coast, my boy," said the pleasant old gentleman whose section was opposite theirs. "To-night we'll

be climbing up into January, as you say, again; and then, as we go down the west slope of the Sierras to-morrow, we'll pass through February and March, April and May, till we reach Sacramento, and there it will be June."

Jerry groaned, but Robin's eyes grew dark with pleasure.

"You've been in California before?" she asked the old gentleman.

"I come every year, just at this season. It's like going down into the Garden of Eden, after the sand of the deserts and the snow of the upper Sierras. Later it gets terribly dry and dusty and brown, but now — well, I shan't attempt to tell you about it, for you'll see it for yourselves in a few more hours." And he returned to his newspaper.

Robin's eyes turned mechanically to the window again, but she was not seeing the desolate stretch of sand and sage brush, the patches of white alkali and the dim outlines of far-away purple mountain ranges. Her fancy had flown ahead to the strange and beautiful country toward which they were speeding. What waited them beyond the snowy barrier of the Sierras — happiness or sorrow? Would California ever be home? Don and Jerry were too young to realize fully how much it meant — this breaking of old ties and starting out on a new adventure. There were no misgivings in their boyish hearts, and, to tell the truth, there was far more of anticipation than dread in Robin's own.

That night — the last one of their journey — she asked the porter to make her berth early, but not because she wanted to sleep. For hours she lay looking up at the stars and thinking of many things, her heart and brain throbbing with memories and hopes and prayers. When at last she fell asleep, it was with nothing but peace and courage in her breast.

It was broad morning when Robin awoke. Don and Jerry were chatting with the old gentleman across the aisle, and she could hear the porter arranging the berth next hers, thumping pillows vigorously.

"It must be late!" she said to herself, sitting up at once, eager to be dressed and out.

An hour later she and her brothers were sitting at their favorite table in the dining car, eating their breakfast between delighted glances out of the windows. They were high among the Sierras now. Deep snow lay all around them and great evergreens towered against the vivid blue of the sky. Once Jerry gave a cry of delight and called Don and Robin to look down at the lovely lake that lay below them like a blue jewel in a hollow of the mountains.

"Let's go out on the back platform where we can see better," suggested Don. "You're through, aren't you, Robin?"

"All but this swallow of coffee. Now I'm ready. — Why, Don!"

"I like that!" exclaimed Jerry. "I thought we'd got through all our tunnels!"

"It isn't a tunnel — there are cracks that show the daylight through," declared Don, much puzzled.

"Snow sheds, young folks! There are forty odd miles of them before you get through," said a voice at the next table — the voice of their friend the old gentleman.

"What are they for?" asked Jerry.

"To keep the snow from the tracks. Travel would frequently be blocked without them, for the snowfall is very heavy up here near the summit. That lake we just passed is famous as the scene of a great tragedy. A party of emigrants were caught there in a terrible storm, many years ago, and died of starvation. Ah — here we come into the sunshine once more!"

But hardly had he spoken when it was dark again. For some time the train swung in and out of the snow sheds, and our young travelers had to be content with only brief and tantalizing glimpses of the wild mountain scenery through which they were passing. But at length the last shed was left behind on the long, winding descent toward the coast.

Now the seasons began to change with what was indeed bewildering rapidity. The snow disappeared. Flowering shrubs and patches of green grass softened the rugged mountain slopes. Fruit orchards whirled past, pink or white with blossoms. Maple and oak leaves seemed larger with every

mile. The air grew so warm that windows were thrown wide the length of the car, and every one felt the intoxicating influence of this sudden change from midwinter to May. At the town of Colfax little barefooted boys thronged the station platform with bunches of roses and lilacs to sell.

It was past noon when the train pulled into Sacramento. Here Robin and her brothers were to change to a branch road. Good-bys were said to the acquaintances made on the long overland journey, hand-luggage was gathered together, and presently the three found themselves in the waiting-room of the big station. Jerry was left to look after their belongings, while Don and Robin hunted up the ticket agent to inquire about trains to Minersville.

"You want to go up to Minersville, do you?" asked the agent, pleasantly. "Well, you've just time to make connections with the passenger train — there's only one a day. How many tickets, did you say? Three? All right. Where's the baggage-room? Right down that way. You'll have just about time to get your trunks re-checked. That's your train over yonder, on the farthest track. Here's your change."

"Don, I feel so foolish!" laughed Robin, as they hurried away down the long platform.

"Why?"

"Look at me!"

Don looked. "I don't see anything wrong."

"Then look at the young lady just ahead of us."

"*She's* the one who ought to feel silly. White dress and straw hat and parasol in March!"

"But you must admit she looks more comfortable than I do in my winter coat and furs!"

The last fifty miles of their railroad journey proved to be the pleasantest of all. The train ran slowly as it climbed back into the foothills of the Sierra Nevadas from low-lying Sacramento, stopping now and then at some little town along the way. The grass beside the track was full of wild flowers, all strange and new and beautiful, golden poppies, great spikes of purple lupine and little yellow pansies.

"Do you suppose they grow like that on our ranch?" asked Robin, rapturously. "Oh, boys, we can't help being happy in such a lovely country! Doesn't it seem a different world from the one we were in a week ago?"

The door of the coach was flung open.

"Minersville!" cried the brakeman, and the train slowed to a stop.

CHAPTER III

ENTER TOM QUARTZ

AFTER so many nights in cramped quarters, the rooms of the Minersville hotel seemed quite luxurious to our travelers. They sought their beds soon after an excellent supper, slept delightfully, and were astir early the next morning. As soon as they had breakfasted the three started out on a tour of inspection.

The air was fresh and balmy. Little linnets were singing sweetly in the big poplars that shaded the hotel. Roses were in blossom in the dooryards they passed, and bits of unoccupied soil were yellow with poppies.

The town itself proved to be a quaint and interesting little place. The main street followed no strictly defined route, but wandered along in a cheerful, aimless, crooked fashion of its own. It was, as they afterward learned, a road with a past. Originally it had been the trail that followed the course of the rows of prospectors' tents, back in the days when this was one of the famous gold camps of California — wild days, full of daring and danger and excitement; days of gold-digging and gambling and grizzly bears; days when the Vigilance Com-

mittee ruled in Minersville — Hangtown it was then.

For some time Robin and Don and Jerry wandered about, enjoying the lovely weather, the novelty of the place, and the feeling of *terra firma* once more after their long journey. They betrayed their eastern origin to the genial clerk of a little drug store by asking for "a quarter's worth" of something instead of "two bits' worth." They stared curiously at some Chinese children they met. Finally they strayed into a neat little restaurant and ate their first genuine Mexican "hot tamales," fiery and delicious.

Arriving quite by chance at the post-office, it occurred to Don to go in and inquire about the stage to Angel Flat — the village nearest their destination. To his chagrin he learned that "Sandy McDowell," stage-driver to Angel, had left the post-office a short half-hour before, and that there would not be another stage for three days.

"He runs only three times a week," explained the postmaster, politely. "Anyway, the stage would take you straight up to Angel Flat, and your place, near as I can make out, must be five or six miles from there and on the road that runs round by Twenty Rattles. You'd better hire a rig and driver to take you up. There's a livery stable down the street a way."

"Thank you — I guess that's our only plan," said Don, turning away from the little window.

"Whar d' y'u say y'u wanted to go, boy?" asked a

curiously pleasant, though uncultivated voice, behind him.

Don looked around in surprise, and saw a tall, spare old man standing by him — a man with face and hands reddened and browned by exposure; with white mustache and beard, and thick white hair; and with remarkably piercing blue eyes, shaded by bushy eyebrows that were still quite black. He wore a dark woolen shirt, and his trousers were tucked into his huge boots.

"Did y'u say y'u wanted to go up Angel way?" asked the stranger again. "I'm goin' up myself in an hour or so. Mebby I might take y'u along."

"There are three of us," explained Don, for Jerry and Robin were waiting outside. "And we've got three trunks and no end of little traps besides. Could you make room for all that?"

"Wall, now, I shouldn't wonder," drawled the old man, in his slow, musical voice. "I've got a two-seated wagon, an' thar's a lot o' room behind the back seat. I come down with some folks that had been visitin' up to Twenty Rattles. It's the mine's rig I'm drivin'."

"Twenty Rattles!" exclaimed Don, delighted. "That's the very place we want to get to — or, rather, we want to get to a little farm about two miles this side. Maybe you know the place. It belonged to my father, but my uncle, a man named Sturtevandt, has been ——"

"Sturtevandt!" thundered Don's new acquaint-

ance, so suddenly and in so changed a voice that poor Don stared at him in amazement. What a startling transformation! The kindly blue eyes were flashing fire, and the black brows were drawn together in a terrific scowl.

"What on earth have I said?" wondered Don.

"So y'u're goin' to see Johnnie Sturtevandt, be y'u? Wall, then, I reckon I'll not have room for any o' Johnnie Sturtevandt's kin! Good day to y'u!" and the curious old chap turned on his heel and strode out from the office, followed by Don's eyes. But just outside the door the tall figure stopped short.

"Wall, now, did y'u ever see anything like that?" the old man remarked, quite mildly. "Wall, now!"

Don, his indignation mastered by his curiosity, stepped quickly to the stranger's side and asked what was funny. To his fresh surprise the face turned upon him was as serene and cloudless as a May morning.

"Do y'u see that?"

Don looked where the long finger pointed. Waiting in front of the post-office was a four-horse team, hitched to a high, two-seated, mud-spattered mountain wagon, cramped to the curb. On the front seat of this interesting vehicle sat an immense black and white cat, a hero of many bloody fields to judge from the nicks and scars on his ears and his wicked old face. His back was arched with pleasure just now, and a hoarse, wheezy, asthmatic purr reached

Don's ear. The reason for his feline majesty's good humor was evident. Robin Arnold, who adored cats, was standing tiptoe to stroke his back and scratch his extended chin.

"Wall, now—think o' that!" ejaculated Don's companion. "Think o' Tom Quartz lettin' any one touch him like that!"

"Cats always like Robin. She mesmerizes 'em, I guess," said Don.

"Robin? Robin? Who's she?" asked the old man, sharply, looking round at the boy.

"My sister Roberta."

"That's your sister makin' up to my cat?"

"Yes, if that's your cat."

Just then there was an explosion of spitting and snarling on the wagon seat, and Robin, drawing back suddenly, looked ruefully at a long and bloody scratch on her gloveless hand.

"Tom, y'u old sinner! Tom, y'u rattle-snake!" shouted Don's companion, striding across the sidewalk and fetching Tom Quartz such a cuff that the poor cat rolled over backward into the wagon box.

"Seems to me," mused Don to himself, "that man and his cat are mighty well mated. First they purr and then they scratch. Hurt much, Robin?" he added aloud.

"Oh, no, but I *was* surprised. He acted so friendly. I suppose I ought not to have touched him," she said apologetically to Tom's owner; "but he's such a beauty, and I'm very fond of animals."

"He's an ungrateful scamp to turn against the hand that showed him kindness," said the old man, with beautiful courtesy. "Tom's temper ain't what it was when he was a kitten. He lived at the Twenty Rattles boardin'-house a year, an' the men teased the life out'n him, an' made him crosser'n a grizzly. Then I took him in, an' he'n I have lived together ever since. We suit."

"Do you live near the Twenty Rattles Mine?" asked Robin, as eagerly as her brother had done. "That's near where we are going, — my brothers and I."

"Now she'll catch it!" thought Don, smiling mischievously; but Tom Quartz' master continued to be a person of surprises. In the most cordial of tones he answered Robin, turning to Don also as he spoke:—

"Yes, Missy, I'm just startin' back to Twenty Rattles now, an' I'd be pleased to take y'u up. I'll ask y'u just a dollar a head, people an' trunks. It'd cost y'u more'n twice that by stage, an' McDowell's went, anyway."

"We'll be delighted to go with you," assented Don, anxious to clinch the bargain before their erratic friend could change his mind. "Our things are over at the El Dorado House. It won't take us half an hour to get ready. Where's Jerry, Robin?"

"Wandered off somewhere. Oh, there he is!" as she caught sight of a long-legged figure standing

"THE THREE ORPHANS STOOD THERE, JUST WHERE HARD-HEARTED LARRY HAD DROPPED THEM."

in front of a shop window where a collection of geological specimens, crystals and ores, was exhibited. Don called his brother, and the three climbed into the wagon with the now subdued Tom Quartz, and were driven back to the hotel. There they spent a half-hour collecting their belongings and eating a hasty lunch. An hour before noon everything was ready, and the final stage of their journey was begun.

The drive from Minersville back into the mountains was a novel experience for the eastern girl and boys. Up hill and down dale went the four sturdy, sure-footed horses; but the general tendency of the road was all up and up and up. The occasional down grades were covered at a breakneck gallop that made Robin hold her breath.

"That's how we make up the time we lose in climbin'," said Larry Jukes, for such they had learned was the name of their charioteer. "Reckon y'u ain't used to such drivin' back East! Reckon y'ur city horses would go onto their precious noses if y'u ran 'em down hill! Ours is used to it. They don't never stumble. Ho, there, Ben!" he cried, flicking one of the leaders with his long whip, and turning in his seat to put down the heavy brake. "Scared, Missy?" he asked, smiling gently at Robin's set face. She was sitting beside him, while the boys slid about on the wide back seat, with Tom Quartz between them.

"Oh, no, I'm not scared! I'm just thanking my

stars you are such a good driver!" she explained, shuddering a bit as she glanced down into the depths of a ravine that descended from within a yard of their right wheels.

"Y'u needn't worry — I'll never spill y'u! Hold on tight so's not to bounce out when we go over a 'thanky ma'am,' as y'u call 'em back East."

"Did you ever live back East?" asked Jerry.

"No, *sir!* But I've seen plenty easterners out here, an' heard their talk. I ain't never been outside California in my life. California's good enough for me. I'm a native son."

"A what?" queried Jerry.

"I belong to the 'Native Sons of California,'" said Mr. Jukes, with pride. "There ain't so many fellows as old as I be that were born an' brought up here — not many pure United States whites, that is to say."

Jerry looked at the back of the driver's scarlet neck and opened his mouth to say something very funny, but wisely concluded that it would be politer not to do so.

"Ever heard of Joaquin Miller, the great poetry-writer of these here parts?" asked Mr. Jukes.

"I have," said Robin, "but I never read much of his poetry. Do you like it?"

Mr. Jukes turned a look of surprise on his seat-mate.

"Like it? Wall, now! He's a great poet, Joaquin is. He tells things that we folks up here

in the hills knows all about, but ain't got sense enough to put in words. He writ one little song for that Society I was tellin' about. Want to hear it? It's about the times when this here country was new."

"It looks pretty new yet, seems to me," said Don, looking about him with boyish delight in the "unexplored" aspect of his surroundings. They had not passed a house for several miles now, and the narrow wagon track itself was the only sign of civilization.

"But of course we want to hear the poem. Please do recite it," urged Robin.

"I'll sing it," declared Larry Jukes. "I made the tune myself. I sing it nights, sometimes, when me an' Tom are sittin' by our fire. It goes like this." And then, in a husky, sweet, old-fashioned voice, to an odd, monotonous, but pleasing melody, he crooned the beautiful, pathetic words of Joaquin Miller's song.

"We have worked our claims,
We have spent our gold,
Our barks are astrand on the bars;
We are battered and old,
Yet at night we behold
Outcroppings of gold in the stars.

"Though battered and old,
Our hearts are bold;
Yet oft do we repine
For the days of old,
For the days of gold,
For the days of forty-nine.

"Where the rabbits play,
And the quail all day
Pipe on the chaparral hill;
A few more days
And the last of us lays
His pick aside, and all is still.

"We are wreck and stray,
We are cast away,
Poor battered old hulks and spars;
But we hope and pray
On the judgment day
We shall strike it up in the stars.

"Though battered and old,
Our hearts are bold;
Yet oft do we repine
For the days of old,
For the days of gold,
For the days of forty-nine!"

No one felt like speaking when Larry's song was ended. The horses were climbing now, bending their rough-coated shoulders bravely to the effort. Up and up and up they went, curving around the side of a pine-clad butte that stretched high above them. At last a more level space was reached, and Larry pulled in his horses to rest, setting the brake to keep the wheels from pulling backward.

Robin looked about her with delight. The golden green of the young oak leaves, the rich, dark foliage of the pines and cedars, the dainty, unfamiliar wild flowers scattered lavishly everywhere, the intensely blue sky above the tree tops, all united to make a picture that thrilled her beauty-loving heart. Only a little breeze touched their faces, but farther up the

hillside they could see the pine boughs swaying gracefully, and the music of the wind among the branches came down to them as from very far away.

"How good it smells up here!" commented Jerry, sniffing approvingly.

"It's the warm sun on the evergreens," said Larry. "It's more so in summer. Hark! D' y'u hear anything?"

Every one listened.

"It sounds like young turkeys," said Don. "What is it, Mr. Jukes?"

"It's the quail, 'pipin' on the chaparral hill,' like I was singin' to y'u about."

"But our quail don't call like that. They say 'Bob–White!'" protested Jerry.

"Can't help what down-east birds do. Them there's quail. Do y'ur quail wear little bonnets atop of their heads?"

"Of course not!"

"H'm. Must be funny lookin' critters."

"It's yours that are funny," rejoined Jerry, a little hotly, for he was still ardently loyal to the East from which he had been so anxious to emigrate, and he had already discovered that the old Californian scorned everything on the farther side of the Sierras.

"Is that chaparral?" asked Don, hurriedly, for he had his private misgivings as to the stability of Mr. Jukes' temper, and he did not care to see the blue eyes flash lightning and the black brows contract fiercely again.

"That there?" asked Larry, pointing with his whip handle. "No, that's manzanita — that bush with the shiny red bark an' the sort of grayish leaves. See how crooked the branches are? I've heard there's a big standin' offer made by some society or ruther, for a perfectly straight stick of manzanita, three foot long — or mebby it's five, I ain't certain. 'D like to know what they mean to do with it when they get it — which they ain't likely to," he added with conviction. "I reckon it's a safe enough offer."

Jerry registered a silent vow to discover the fabled straight stick of manzanita and thereby rescue the Arnold family from poverty. That and the gold mine in their back yard ——

"Oh, I say," he cried, suddenly remembering something; "I was looking at some ore specimens in a window back at Minersville, and I noticed some of them were labeled 'Twenty Rattles.' Do you know anything about that mine, Mr. Jukes?"

"Wall, I ought to! I've worked off an' on there for a good many years."

"You're a miner yourself then?" asked Don.

"Not exactly. That is to say, I don't work underground — don't like the powder smoke. I prospect. Folks around here say I'm the best prospector in the district. Reckon they lie. But I've prospected this here country since way back in the early days ——

"'The days of old,
The days of gold,
The days of forty-nine.'"

The last words were spoken very softly, as if he were remembering things that had happened long ago.

"I suppose there isn't much gold left, around here," ventured Don.

Larry Jukes laughed. "There's millions of it, but it's mostly down in the bowels of the mountains. 'Tain't much use washin' gravel or scratchin' grass roots any more."

"What do you mean by that?" asked Robin, much mystified.

"I mean there ain't much gold left near the surface o' the ground. It's been got; right around here it has, leastways."

"Well," she said, "I'm sure I hope you got your share of it 'in the days of old.' "

And then, to the utter astonishment of all but Don, the eccentric Mr. Jukes underwent a sudden transformation.

"No!" he said in a harsh, strained voice. "I ain't got the half my fair share! Get up!" he shouted to his horses, releasing the brake.

With a sigh of protest the weary animals obeyed; the wheels creaked and turned; the rattling and jolting process was begun again, and not another word was said for a long time.

It was Tom Quartz who finally broke the newly formed ice. Tiring of his place between Don and Jerry, he rose, yawned, stretched himself, and sprang straight to the shoulder of his master. There he

sat, purring contentedly and rubbing his head against Mr. Jukes' whiskers.

"Tom's a very clever old fellow, isn't he?" remarked Robin, experimentally. Tom's master replied affably, and the conversation once more flowed smoothly on.

As the road wound higher and higher into the mountains, the scenery became wilder and more beautiful with every mile. The trees were much larger than below, many of the pines and cedars reaching a height of a hundred and fifty feet or more. There was scarcely any underbrush, and the hillside, carpeted with brown needles of the evergreens, stretched away, below and above them, open as a lawn.

Larry Jukes was all friendliness again. He told them wild stories of "the days of old," he taught them to know chaparral and birch and the lovely wild azaleas; he pointed out places of interest along the way, — here the former site of the old Gray Mule Mine, famous producer once, but long since abandoned; there, the crazy little shack where a lonely prospector had been murdered, quarter of a century before, for the gold dust he had accumulated; yonder ——

But unfortunate Jerry interrupted.

"I suppose there's a good deal of that sort of thing going on in this kind of a country."

"What sort o' thing?" demanded Larry, turning around in his seat so quickly that Tom Quartz lost

his footing, and had to scramble back to his master's shoulder, growling and spitting savagely.

"You needn't get mad about it!" cried hot-tempered Jerry, adding, more mildly: "I only meant that in a mining country there'd naturally be lots of lawlessness, murdering and quarreling and stealing and so on."

"Don't go to supposin' about things y'u don't know nothin' about," growled Larry, morosely.

After that no one tried to set the conversational ball rolling again, and the drive continued in a silence relieved only by the murmur of the wind in the pines, the rattle of the wagon over the deeply rutted road, and the heavy breathing of the climbing horses. At last the top of a ridge was reached, and the descent down the opposite side begun. It was growing late. The sun had set and only the dim twilight of the hills was left. The world seemed suddenly terribly lonely and forsaken to Robin. For the first time since she left the East, a wave of homesickness overwhelmed her.

"Aren't we nearly there?" she asked in a trembling voice.

Larry pointed down the long slope of the road.

"Do y'u see that light, yonder among the trees?"

"Yes!"

"Wall, that there's Johnnie Sturtevandt's ranch. The Mercedes River flows between the road and his house, but there's a bridge y'u can walk across. I'm goin' to stop this side."

"But our baggage!" protested Don. "We can't carry our trunks that distance. Can't you drive us over to the house?"

"I could, but I ain't goin' to. D' y'u think I'd set foot on Johnnie Sturtevandt's land?"

"It isn't Uncle Jonathan's land — it's ours, Don's, and Robin's, and mine!" cried Jerry, angrily. "Can't you look at it that way?"

But Larry Jukes was not to be softened or persuaded. At the bottom of the descent he pulled in his team, climbed down over the wheel, and held up his hands to help Robin alight. Indignant, but helpless, the boys scrambled after. Larry lifted out their trunks in his powerful arms and set them carefully down behind a clump of chaparral.

"There won't nothin' touch 'em here. In the mornin' y'u can have Uncle Johnnie trot out with his wheelbarrow an' pack 'em in!" he said soothingly. "Y'u needn't pay me to-night," he added, seeing that Don was fumbling with his pocket-book in the dusk. "Y'u can run over to my place some day an' settle for y'ur ride. I live just about a mile on along the road, halfway betwixt here an' Twenty Rattles. Good night to y'u! Hope y'u'll enjoy yourselves to Uncle Johnnie's!"

There was a crack of the whip, a turning of wheels, a sound of galloping hoofs growing fainter and fainter in the distance, — and then the great silence of the Sierras shut them in. They could hear no sound besides the gurgle and rush of the

river over the stones. The sky had lost the luminous glow of early evening, and a few stars had begun to blink overhead. The air had grown suddenly frosty. A greater loneliness than they had ever before felt came over the three orphans as they stood there, silent, just where hard-hearted Larry had dropped them.

CHAPTER IV

MAGGIE

Don was the first to pull himself together.

"You mustn't stand here in the cold, Robin. We might as well go on across the river and hunt up our house."

Picking up their hand-baggage, they started down a grass-grown wagon track that led to the river. The bridge proved to be but a rickety affair — so much so that Don privately rejoiced that Larry had not tried to cross it with his heavy load.

Beyond the bridge they followed the track for some little distance. Low trees and bushes grew so densely to their left that they could catch no glimpse of the light they had seen from the top of the ridge. Suddenly it flashed into their eyes again, and, turning to their left, they found that they were standing in front of a fair-sized building, so dim in the fast-gathering darkness that they could just make out its vague outlines. The light came from a window, and shone but faintly out into the dusk.

Don, ashamed of his panicky desire to run away, strode directly up the steps and gave a resounding knock on the door.

For a minute there was silence; then a strange

sound came from within the mysterious and inhospitable dwelling, — the last sound they would have expected to hear under the circumstances — the frightened sobbing of a child! Robin caught her breath, but Don knocked again, louder than before.

Light steps approached the door. The sobbing ceased. Then a bolt was shot back and the door flung wide.

"Come in an' get me, if you want to! *I* don't care!"

These were the surprising words that welcomed the travelers to their new home. It was a little girl who spoke them — a little slip of a girl in a faded blue calico frock. Her face was streaked with tears; her eyelids were red and swollen; her curly black hair hung in tangled disorder on her shoulders; her big, wistful dark eyes, like a hunted fawn's, stared straight out into the night.

"Why don't you come in?" she demanded fiercely. "I ain't afraid!"

"You needn't be," Don began hurriedly to assure her; but Robin, slipping by him, had the lonely little person in her arms, and was saying tenderly:

"We don't know who you are, dear; and you don't know who we are; but that doesn't matter. Don't be frightened. Just tell us what's the trouble and we'll take care of you!"

"Doesn't Uncle Jonathan live here?" asked Jerry.

The little girl shook her head slowly, in a puzzled way.

"Mr. Johnnie Sturtevandt," explained Don. "Isn't this his place?"

"He's dead!" announced the child, solemnly.

"Dead!" cried Robin and her brothers in a breath.

"When did he die?" asked Don.

"Day before yesterday. They buried him to-day." The child's eyes dilated with horror. "They took him off in a wagon. They tried to make me go to Angel with them, but they couldn't. I hid in the chaparral."

"Why didn't you want to go?" asked Robin.

"They were going to take me to the poor-house, an' I didn't want to go there. I thought I could stay here an' take care of myself, but I can't. It's been so awful lonesome since they took gran'pa away. I ain't going to stay here. They'll come back for me to-morrow, an' then I'll go with them. I thought it was them when you came. Who are you fellows, anyway?" she asked, suddenly breaking off her story to stare curiously from one to another of her unexpected guests.

"If you're Mr. Sturtevandt's granddaughter, we must be some kind of cousins, for he's — he was our father's uncle," Don informed her.

"If you'll lend me a pencil and paper I'll figure it out," put in irrepressible Jerry, and, quite to everybody's surprise, the little girl smiled brightly at the very mild sally.

"I'm so glad you fellows have come," she sighed in sudden confidence, clinging to Robin's hand. "I'm Maggie Sturtevandt. You're going to stay, aren't you?"

"That's what we're here for. This is our property, you see," said Jerry, rather importantly.

"Are you the doctor?" asked old Johnnie Sturtevandt's grandchild, fixing Jerry with her serious eyes. "Gran'pa used to say the ranch belonged to a doctor back East. Are you him?"

"Ho — ho! Dr. Jerry Arnold, M.D.!" derided Don, but Robin hastened to explain the situation to the newly discovered cousin.

"And now," Robin concluded, "we're very tired and cold and hungry, and this is the only home we've got in the whole world. Do you suppose we could have some supper, Maggie, — and a fire?" she added, looking longingly at the big empty fireplace at one side of the room. "If we had known of Uncle Jonathan's death, we would have——"

"Didn't you know anything about our coming?" asked Don, suddenly. "Didn't your grandpa ever get our letters? We wrote, three weeks ago, and again before we started, but we didn't receive any answer."

Maggie shook her head. "Gran'pa hadn't been to Angel for a month. He's been too poorly. An' I've had too much to do to go."

"*You!*" exclaimed Robin. "You don't mean to say that you would go all the way to Angel Flat

alone, through these wild woods, — such a little girl as you?"

Maggie looked at her in astonishment.

"I'm twelve, if I am little, an' I'm not afraid to go anywheres alone."

"Do you walk?" asked Jerry, admiringly.

"Sometimes, but most gen'rally I ride Stubby."

"Who's he?"

"Gran'pa's burro."

"Oh, please, children!" interrupted weary Robin, "let's wait till after supper to find out everything. Don, dear, do see if you can't find some wood to start a fire — it's grown so cold. And I'll get supper, Maggie, if you'll just show me where things are."

"No, ma'am," protested Maggie, suddenly realizing that she was not doing her duty as a hostess. "You lay by your things an' rest, an' I'll tend to supper."

"Good work, Maggie! I'll help!" cried Jerry, enthusiastically. He followed her into the next room, whence a great banging of stove-lids and clatter of dishes announced that the longed-for meal was in process of preparation. Don had already disappeared in search of fuel, and Robin was left to herself.

She took off her hat, coat, and gloves, and then, dropping into the one rocking-chair that the room afforded, began to look about her with languid interest. The room was a large, square one, low-

"ONE BEAUTIFUL THING AFTER ANOTHER EMERGED FROM THE RECESSES OF THE ENCHANTED TRUNK"

raftered and with unplastered walls. The furniture was of the scantiest, but everything looked clean and comfortable. The floor was uncarpeted, save for a big bearskin that lay in front of the fireplace. Deer's antlers, fox and coyote pelts, and dozens of gray squirrels' tails fantastically decorated the walls. The wide board that served as a mantel shelf was laden with bits of rock, many of which glittered in the lamplight with specks of mineral and tiny crystals. Above them, from hooks screwed securely into the wall, hung a handsome rifle.

At last, in their idle wandering from one object to another, Robin's eyes were caught by a picture, the only one in the whole room. Something about the dim outlines of the face inside the old-fashioned frame seemed strangely familiar to the girl. She rose, turned the lamp-wick a little higher, and crossed the room.

"Why, it's Great-grandfather Sturtevandt!" she exclaimed aloud, looking closely at the handsome old gentleman with the severe brows and the stern downward curve of the shaven upper lip. "You dear, cross old ancestor of ours—I'm truly glad to see you!"

"Who's that you're so glad to see?" asked Don, coming in from the kitchen with an armful of kindling, and slamming the door behind him.

"Come and see! It's our own great-grandfather. Doesn't it seem absurd to find such a loyal old Vermonter away out here?"

"It's Grandfather Sturtevandt all right," said Don, looking over her shoulder. "And come to think of it, there's nothing so funny about Uncle Jonathan having a picture of his own father on his wall. Seems sort of homelike to see the old chap, doesn't it, Robin?"

"Yes, indeed! I feel better already," cried Robin, bravely. "It's a dear old room, Don, if it *is* rough, and when we get our pictures and books unpacked and things fixed up a bit, it'll be as cosy as you please. Won't it, Don?" she asked wistfully, longing to hear him second her hopeful prophecy.

"You bet it will!" agreed Don, with inelegant enthusiasm, as he piled his kindling and sticks scientifically on the hearth and scratched a match. "And Maggie's a little lady," the boy went on, kneeling on the bearskin and touching off his fire in various places. "She showed me where to get wood and stuff, and she's hustling Jerry about like a major. I didn't know there was so much work in the old boy. They'll have supper in no time. She says she's 'done' for her grandpa ever since she can remember."

"Fancy! Is she an orphan, Don? I didn't like to ask."

"Guess so. I overheard scraps of her talk with Jerry while I was splitting kindlings. They've struck up a great acquaintance, already. She isn't nearly so shy with him — I suppose because they're nearer of an age. By the way, Robin," he added in a low voice, "what are we going to do about her?"

"Do? Why, Don, what can we do but keep her with us? We can't turn her out, any more than we would have done Uncle Jonathan. Much less, in fact, for she's just a little girl."

"I knew you'd say so, and of course we couldn't — not with her great-grandfather and ours staring down at us like that!" and Don glanced up at the stiff old gentleman on the wall. "We're not very well fixed to adopt a child, Robin, but I suppose we can all starve together!"

"All starve together! Well, I like that!" shouted an indignant voice at the door of the kitchen, and there stood Jerry, flushed and breathless. "You two people sit by the fire and talk about starving, while Peggy and I wear our fingers to the bone getting you up a regular spread!"

"Supper's ready," smiled Maggie, shyly, past his elbow, and Don and his sister jumped up with alacrity.

Robin found the kitchen a snug little room, cosily warm to-night from the rousing fire Jerry had made in the old cook-stove. The table was covered with checkered red and white oilcloth, tacked securely down; the knives and forks had wooden handles; the plates and cups were of thick ironstone china, and there were neither butter plates nor napkins. But what were such trifles to the royal appetites of fasting youth? A delicious odor of fried bacon met Don's hungry sniff of anticipation, and Robin gave a sigh of comfort as she poured the clear, golden-brown coffee from the tin pot into the handleless cups.

"What a splendid little cook you are, Maggie!" she commented approvingly. "Who taught you?"

"Gran'pa. He said I got so I could do 'most anything as well as he could. But I can't make bread," she added sadly. "It ain't fit to eat. Stubby won't look at my bread."

"Never mind," laughed Robin, "that's one of the things I *can* do. Chrissie taught me, and I'll guarantee that even Stubby won't turn up his nose at *my* bread!"

As a matter of fact, the bread on the table *was* rather heavy and sour, but none the less the plate had to be replenished more than once, and bacon and eggs, pease and potatoes and baked beans and coffee disappeared at an alarming rate.

"We *shall* starve soon if we eat like this often," warned Don in Robin's ear. "This stuff that comes in cans is expensive."

"Don't croak, Donnie! Who knows but we may strike gold in our back yard, as Jerry prophesies?"

"Or a straight manzanita stick," began Jerry, but Maggie interrupted him.

"Did you fellows come out here to look for gold?" she asked, with a strange expression on her little face.

"No," answered Robin, hurriedly. "We came for a home. It was just Jerry's nonsense about the gold."

"I'm glad!" said Maggie.

"Why?"

"Because I hate gold! I hate it!"

"Why?" asked Robin again, surprised at the bitterness in the child's voice.

"It makes people ugly, so they don't like each other. Gran'pa was always hunting for gold, an' never found it, an' it made him cross, so he hated people. He hated Larry Jukes worst of anybody. He wouldn't let me even pet Tom Quartz."

Don and Jerry exchanged interested glances, but Robin changed the subject abruptly. She had heard enough of feuds and bitterness for this first day.

"Let's hurry and clear the table so we can sit by the fire and visit a little before bedtime," she suggested, rising and beginning to gather together the plates.

"Speaking of bedtime, where are 'we fellows' going to sleep?" asked Jerry, with an inquiring look in Maggie's direction.

Evidently the little hostess had not got so far as this in her plans.

"Can't I sleep with you, Maggie?" asked Robin.

"Oh, yes, ma'am; my bed's plenty big enough."

"And Jerry and I can bunk anywhere," said Don.

"There's gran'pa's room," said Maggie, slowly, "but I haven't got it straightened up since they took him away. I couldn't bear to go in there, it was so lonesome. You wouldn't want to sleep in there — not to-night."

"I'll tell you," said Jerry. "Give us some blankets and we'll curl down by the fire and sleep like tops."

So it was arranged. By the time the supper dishes had been washed and put away, it was growing late, and the travelers were too tired and sleepy to spend much time in talking.

Robin kissed her brothers good night, and followed Maggie's candle up the dark, steep stairway to a little bedroom under the roof, and long before her little bedfellow's eyes had closed upon the dark, the older girl was fast asleep, worn out by the long drive and the strangeness of this home-coming.

Don and Jerry, after removing their shoes and collars for greater comfort, cuddled down cosily among their blankets on the warm bearskin, and whispered together a little while after everything had grown still overhead. Then their drowsy voices, too, died away into silence, and no sound was left in the room save the subdued murmur of the flames that crept around Don's big back-log.

Only Grandfather Sturtevandt, grimly wide awake on the wall, was left to watch his sleeping descendants through the long night.

CHAPTER V

THE ROBIN'S NEST

TINKLE, tinkle, tinkle;—drip, drop, drip, drop—

For half an hour Robin had been drowsily conscious of the monotonous music; but now she came wide awake with a start, and realized that a steady rain was beating on the roof above her head and dimming the window so that she could not see out.

"Oh, dear, Maggie,—our poor trunks!" she exclaimed in dismay to the little girl, who was already half dressed.

Jumping out of bed, Robin hurried into dressing-gown and slippers and ran downstairs. Jerry and Don were still fast asleep, rolled in their blankets beside the charred remains of the fire they had cheerfully agreed to keep burning all night.

"Wake up, boys!" cried Robin, tapping the slumberous youth nearest her with the toe of her slipper. "Wake up, Don!"

"What's wrong?" yawned Don, sitting up and rubbing his eyes.

"It's raining—oh, like *suds*, as Chrissie used to say!" explained Robin, "and there our poor dear trunks are sitting out under the chaparral, just where that horrid old Larry Jukes left them!"

"Guess they can't get any wetter than they are by this time. It's a dandy morning to sleep, Robin, — can't you let a fellow alone a few minutes longer?" And Don snuggled down again into his blankets.

"Very well," said Robin, in a much-abused tone, "I shall have to go out and get them myself. I think perhaps I can drag them up in an hour or two. Of course I shall get a little wet, but nobody will care. Now if I only had a brother ——"

"Poor girl!" sympathized Don, watching her lazily as she crossed the room and fumbled with the bolt of the outside door. "I'd stop to put on my shoes and stockings first, if I were you. They have rattlesnakes up here, you know, and just as like as not, one will wind around your bare ankles."

"What's that about snakes?" asked a sleepy, but anxious voice from Jerry's side of the bearskin; and then — "Oh, I say, Robin, that's not fair!"

She had flung the outer door open, and a great wave of cold, damp air rushed in on her brothers and made Robin herself shiver as she wrapped her dressing-gown closer about her.

"Why, boys," she exclaimed in surprise, "so you did bring the trunks in last night, after all! You might have told me!"

"But we didn't!" denied Don, now wide awake and on his feet.

"We never thought of it," added Jerry, following his brother and sister to the door. There, sure enough, were the three trunks, safe and dry under

the steep porch roof, that was shedding sheets of water.

"Come in, Robin — you'll take cold," said Don, drawing his sister inside and closing the door.

"But who did it?" she asked, much puzzled.

"Ask something easy!" from Jerry.

"Maggie's the only person beside us here, and of course she couldn't have done it."

"Maybe Larry Jukes repented and came back while we were at supper. We'd never in the world have heard him; we were too busy eating."

"Oh, come off, Don," protested Jerry. "We were hungry, I know, but don't make us out ——"

"Hungry? I should say we were. And the queer thing about it is that I'm just as hungry this morning as if I hadn't had a bite last night!"

"Guess it's the mountain air," Jerry suggested, as he put on his collar and tied his necktie as best he could without a glass.

Robin had gone back upstairs to dress, and Maggie was busy in the kitchen. Don sent Jerry to help her, while he himself rebuilt the fire on the big stone hearth and made tidy the living-room.

By the time Robin came down, everything was in smooth running order and breakfast nearly ready. Maggie was peeping anxiously into the coffee-pot; Jerry was blistering his face making toast, and Don was pouring evaporated cream from a newly opened tin can into a cracked pitcher, and diluting the rich yellow fluid with cold water.

"Go easy, there, Don!" cried Jerry, letting his toast scorch as he watched the last-mentioned operation. "Don't put in so much water! You'll make it thin as skim milk!"

"Sorry, but we've got to economize," explained Don, in elder-brotherly accents. "This plaguey stuff costs ten cents a can, and we used a whole can just for supper last night. If we get into such extravagant habits as that, it won't be long before we go under, financially."

"Doesn't anybody up here keep cows?" Robin asked; but Maggie didn't know of anybody who did.

Maggie was by this time beginning to feel well acquainted with her cousins, and talked freely during the breakfast hour, telling them many interesting things about this country that was so strange to them and so familiar to her. They listened absorbedly, Robin even forgetting her dislike for the "canned cream," and fastidious Jerry swallowing Maggie's corn-meal mush as if it were his favorite dish.

After breakfast, while Maggie washed the dishes, the boys brought in the trunks and Robin busied herself with unpacking.

All day long the rain came steadily down, and, since it was impossible to explore their out-of-door possessions, the energetic young Arnolds, with Maggie's eager and wondering assistance, devoted themselves to rearranging and settling the house.

Though old Johnnie Sturtevandt had been as neat as any woman, and Maggie his apt pupil, things had, of course, fallen into some disorder during the days of illness, and considerable vigorous wielding of broom and mop and dust cloth was necessary before Robin declared with a sigh of weary satisfaction that "even Chrissie couldn't find any fault now."

With only a half-hour's intermission for a hasty lunch at noon, the work went merrily on. The boys' belongings were carried up to the little chamber under the roof, which Robin promised herself to transform into a capital "den" for them some day. "Grandpa's room" was turned into a cosy bedroom for herself and Maggie. The bed was thoroughly aired and renovated, freshly made, and covered with a spotless counterpane; a coyote skin was laid on the floor beside it; the top of the rough pine wash-stand was hidden under a snowy towel, and around its gaunt legs a skirt of gay cretonne was charitably draped by Robin's deft fingers. The boys put up a broad shelf next the window, and this, covered with the same cretonne and further decorated with a ruffle and brass-headed tacks, made a dressing-table that widened Maggie's eyes with wonder and admiration. It was like a fairy story to the little girl to see one beautiful thing after another emerge from the recesses of the enchanted trunks. She hovered about Robin in a flutter of eager excitement, touching the little silver toilet

articles with timid fingers, or patting with loving reverence Robin's simple gowns and ribbons and dainty undergarments.

In the living-room the great problem was that of furniture. There was only one rocking-chair—voted Robin's by common consent, and of the straight ones, one was rickety to the danger point, and altogether there were not enough to go around. Clearly, something must be done, or, as Jerry complained, he and Don would have to take turns standing up.

"There's an old rocker upstairs," volunteered Maggie, "but it's broke."

Jerry dashed up to investigate.

"Be careful!" yelled Don, a minute later, as he heard his brother come clattering down. "Those stairs are awful steep!"

But he spoke too late. Bang! Bang! Bumpity-bang! A frightful racket and a groan of pain caused an alarmed group to gather at the foot of the stairs. Fortunately neither chair nor boy was found to be injured, save for sundry scratches and bruises. While Robin comforted Jerry with court-plaster and witch-hazel, Don devoted himself and his little tool-chest to the service of the old chair, which was speedily restored to usefulness, if not to beauty.

"Now if you could only manufacture a couch, Don!" suggested his admiring sister. "I've got a whole trunk tray full of sofa pillows, and nothing to put them on."

"Didn't you bring our hammock?" asked Jerry.

"Yes, but I don't call this hammock weather," replied Robin, glancing out at the pouring rain.

"Why not string it up in here? There's plenty of room across this corner."

"Bright idea, Jerry!" Don cried, and began straightway to rummage among his things for some strong hooks to screw on the wall.

Jerry's suggestion proved to have been a most happy one, and all agreed that the gay hammock, swung cosily across the corner of the room and ballasted with pretty pillows and a warm-colored afghan, made a wonderful change in the old room and brightened things up famously.

To Maggie's deep, though unexpressed relief, the odd collection of trophies and curiosities with which her grandfather had decorated the walls and mantel was left untouched, save for dusting and rearranging. Robin, guessing the child's anxiety, had declared at the outset that no other furnishing would be half so appropriate and pretty. Photographs were tacked here and there about the room. A shelf was put up to hold books and the little bronze clock, which was now ticking away the minutes as briskly and merrily as ever, after its week's silence. Don improvised a little table out of an empty barrel and Maggie's molding board, explaining to her entire satisfaction, that it would be but a trifling matter to remove a screw or two and restore her property to its original use on baking days. Then

Robin went fishing in her trunk again and came back with a beautiful, old-fashioned blue and white bed-spread, which, folded once, made a cover that hung quite to the floor, and entirely hid the peculiar anatomy of Don's table.

"I'm so glad I belong to a family of geniuses," commented Jerry, from the hammock, whither he had been allowed to retire in consideration for his bruises. "How on earth did you happen to bring so much stuff with you, Robin? Mrs. Robinson's bag was nothing compared with your trunk."

"Well, that old spread was mother's, and I couldn't bear to leave it behind; I knew I could find a use for all sorts of odds and ends. The bottom of my trunk isn't reached yet. Wait till you see the old white dress that's going to be made into sash curtains, and the—oh, I must show you something else I brought, boys! Don't you dare to laugh!"

But laugh they did when their sister, half proudly, half apologetically, brought out from her bedroom something that had been the pet aversion of all three from their early childhood — a hideous picture done all in wax and hair, and enclosed under glass in a deep, coffin-like frame.

"So that's the sort of thing we paid excess baggage on in New York! Robin, I'm ashamed of you!" scolded Don.

"I couldn't help it, Don — really I couldn't! I knew no one would buy it, and I didn't feel like asking any one to take it as a gift."

"I should rather think not!" came from the depths of the hammock.

"And I hated to destroy it when Great-grandmother Sturtevandt spent so many weary hours over those ghastly little flowers and things."

"Never mind," said Don, resignedly. "We'll hang it up beside grandfather's picture. Maybe it will be company for the old boy." And accordingly the ancient work of art was given the place of honor beside the portrait of their stern forefather, and hung there, tolerated for sentimental reasons by Don and Jerry and Robin, and regarded with admiring awe by their little cousin.

One more task remained before the room was pronounced complete — the hanging of two small paintings whose rich gold frames contrasted brightly with the rough background against which they shone.

"Now I feel that we are really at home," said Robin, as she looked up into the pictured faces of her father and mother. "What shall we call our little nest, children?" she asked, turning to smile at the others from beneath the beautiful portraits.

"I think——" began Maggie, but stopped timidly.

"What do you think, dear?" prompted Robin.

"I think it would be nice to call it the Robin's Nest!"

"Three cheers for Maggie! I second her motion!" shouted Jerry. "All in favor say —— "

And Don joined him in an ear-splitting "Aye!"

CHAPTER VI

PING-PONG AND SUNSHINE

"LET'S go back to New York!" grumbled Jerry, flattening his shapely nose against a rain-blurred window-pane.

Don looked up from his book with a mischievous grin.

"We can't, you know. It's awfully inconsiderate of the railroad companies, but they won't let us travel for nothing. Don't you remember my telling you that we'd have to stay, willy-nilly?"

It was contemptible of Don, but Jerry was too gloomy to resent it.

"A fellow couldn't be expected to know that he was getting into anything like this. Talk about your Lands of Sunshine! — why, California simply isn't in it with Summerville. Bet you it's something like, back there, about now, — fish biting, birds coming back, baseball practice beginning ——"

Jerry stopped suddenly with a little homesick break in his voice that made the older lad ashamed of himself. Throwing down his book, Don crossed the room and gave his brother's shoulder a painfully sympathetic thump.

"Cheer up, old man!" he cried. "What if we

have struck what Chris used to call a 'spell o' weather' — it can't help clearing off in a day or two."

"What'll you bet it can't help it?" asked Jerry, gloomily.

"Maggie ought to know, and she says this is an unusually long pour for so late in the season. And don't you remember what a dandy day it was when we came up from Minersville?"

Jerry shook his head mournfully and refused to be comforted. Ordinarily the lightest-hearted boy in the world, he was nevertheless subject to fits of moodiness which sorely tried his brother's patience and his sister's tact.

Robin, who was resting in the hammock, after a busy morning, came to the rescue.

"Boys, I brought the old ping-pong set. It's in the lower tray of my trunk. Why don't you clear the kitchen table and try a game? It will do you both good."

And it did. Jerry was indifferent at first, and played carelessly, but suddenly he awoke to the fact that Don was beating him, set after set. That would never do! His pride rose and his spirits with it. The furrows smoothed themselves out of his brow; he gripped his racquet with new determination, and went in to win.

Robin smiled with relief as she listened to the musical "ping-pong" of the flying ball, the merry bursts of laughter, and Jerry's triumphant "Forty

— love! Fifty — my game!" as he cut down the score against him. Maggie looked on in fascinated interest, and when Don and Jerry invited her to take a racquet and try her hand, she proved so promising a pupil that the boys foresaw they must look to their laurels. However, they generously and recklessly taught her all the tricks of the game, and applauded her good returns and lively service with patronizing enthusiasm.

The afternoon passed on wings, and Robin's appearance in the doorway with the information that it was time to start supper, was a genuine surprise. But a profounder one followed when the boys and Maggie obeyed her smiling command to "Go look outdoors!" What a blessed change! The gray curtain that had hung so drearily over the earth for days had quite disappeared, and only a few fleecy wisps of cloud, tinted with rose from the vanished sun, were left in the sky. The river valley and the Robin's Nest lay in the shadow of approaching night, but far above them the crests of the eastern mountains were radiant with a warm glow of sunshine. The storm was over at last!

The latter part of the California rainy season is like a prolonged eastern April. Days of steady or intermittent downpour alternate with days of glorious sunshine and blue sky, when the earth dries with surprising rapidity. The little-traveled road that passed the Arnold's ranch was scarcely muddy by noon of the day following the cessation of the

rain. In the morning every needle of the little pines that grew to the right and left and behind the Robin's Nest was hung with glistening drops of moisture, but by the middle of the forenoon the tiny jewels had all vanished, and the wholesome fragrance of sun-warmed evergreens filled the air. Robin and the rest had been up some time, before the sunshine, creeping slowly down the mountain-side, reached the house. Breakfast was hurried through with, the morning work was dispatched in unseemly haste, and then, with Maggie for guide, the young "squatters" set eagerly forth to explore their domain.

"Let's go down to the river first," suggested Jerry, as they stood a minute on the porch, drinking in delicious breaths of the sweet, pure air. "It must be a sight after all this rain."

And he was not disappointed. The beautiful Mercedes, hardly more than a brook in midsummer, is transformed by the heavy spring storms into an angry, rushing torrent that foams and thunders among the huge granite boulders of its steep and winding bed, and carries plunging logs like chips on its tumultuous bosom.

"Wish we had our old canoe here, Don," said Jerry, longingly. "Couldn't we do some lively rapid-shooting, though?"

"Probably Robin has it in that trunk of hers," suggested Don.

"If I have, I shan't unpack it," his sister replied. "I'm not quite ready to lose my brothers yet."

The bridge they had crossed the night of their arrival was still above the danger point, but it was evident that a day more of rain would have seriously imperiled it. Don's practical head was already planning how to raise and repair and strengthen the structure that formed their only connection with the outside world.

Below the bridge, on the ranch side of the river, the banks of the stream were covered by a thick growth of willows and of graceful alders. Above the bridge, both banks had been cleared, and across the river the road could be seen, winding pleasantly up the curves of the stream and finally losing itself behind thickets of white-plumed "birch" or "California lilac," and of the mahogany-colored manzanita, with its waxy pink blossoms. In this direction lay Larry Jukes' cabin, and, farther on, the "Twenty Rattles Mine." Beyond the latter, so Larry had told them, the road turned to the left, crossed the river by ford, and ran, doubling and twisting, but ever keeping its easterly and its upward trend, to Angel Flat, and on, up and up, into the heart of the Sierras.

"What a hurry the water is in!" said Don to his sister, as they stood on the bridge, gazing down in dizzy fascination at the seething torrent close below them. "Where do you suppose it came from, and where is it going, Robin?"

"It started away back in the range, from some little spring," she replied musingly. "It formed

partnerships with other little springs and brooks all along the way, and the rain fell into it, and the melting snows ran down the mountain-sides to join it, and then, first thing it knew, it was a full-fledged river, hurrying like mad over the stones to reach the Sacramento and the Pacific."

"It must be fun to be a river, Robin. Nothing to do all day long but just let yourself go and go and go!"

Robin laughed. "That sounds more like lazy Jerry than like you. But really, Don, the little river does a great deal of work during its journey. Don't you remember Mr. Jukes said that it turned three water-wheels at Twenty Rattles alone? And there must be any number more between here and the Sacramento. And think of all the farms — ranches, I suppose I mean, that it has to stop and irrigate by the way."

"Come along, children! There's more to see than a lot of muddy water!" shouted Jerry, just then. He and Maggie had wandered back from the bridge and were quite a little distance from the others. Roused from their meditative mood, Don and Robin left the bridge and walked slowly back up the grassy wagon track that led to the Robin's Nest.

At their left the jungle of chaparral, underbrush, and young evergreens that began at the edge of the river, extended unbrokenly almost to the house, effectually screening the latter from the sight of any one approaching.

But to their right, back from the river to a distance of several hundred yards, sloped a wide, smooth, open tract, shaded by one great sugar pine and two or three white oaks, studded with swelling leaf-buds and hung with green balls of mistletoe. Down through the middle of this pleasant meadow flowed a little brook, dancing merrily out from the dark woods of the mountain-side above; gurgling playfully over its shallow, pebbly bed in the sunshine, and finally joining the river by way of a baby cataract. At a point not far below its emergence from the forest, this little brook was crossed by a rude water-gate, opened now, but which could be closed, as Maggie explained, when the water was to be diverted to the grass or garden.

"But where is the garden?" asked Don, looking about for any signs of cultivation.

"There isn't any now," replied Maggie. "It used to be across the brook there. Gran'pa always had corn an' potatoes an' beans an' things, but the fences got all broke down an' the cows just came in an' ate everything up."

"Why didn't he mend the fences?" asked Don.

"I don't know — I guess he was too poorly," replied Maggie, rather doubtfully. "He didn't think much about such things, anyway. He was always off hunting prospects, except when he was helping me with the housework."

"I thought you said nobody kept cows up here, Maggie," said Robin.

"Nobody don't — I mean nobody does," she amended hastily. "But folks down Minersville way bring theirs up an' turn them loose every spring an' leave them till fall."

"What for?" asked Jerry.

"'Cause it costs more'n milk's worth to feed them when it's dry season an' all the grass is gone. Even up here in the mountains they get dreadful skinny before fall, an' they're so hungry they'll break through most any kind of a fence to get at anything green. They came right up on the porch an' ate the pansies out of my box last summer," she concluded wofully.

"Poor starved things!" exclaimed Robin. "I call it cruel!"

"And I call it an imposition!" declared Jerry, indignantly. "The idea of expecting us mountaineers to support their old cows on our vegetable gardens and posy beds."

"The fact remains that we've got to have a garden," reflected Don, "and that the cows have got to be kept out of it. How'll we manage, Robin?"

"Barbed wire," suggested Jerry, before his sister had had time to answer.

"Not a bad idea," admitted Don, "but to make a wire fence you've got to have posts, and to get posts you've got to chop down trees and cut them up. We're green at that sort of thing, you know, Jerry; by the time we got posts enough for our fence I fancy it would be too late to plow our ground and start our seeds. Of course we might do the plow-

ing and planting first, but then we shouldn't get our fence done before the cows got here."

"Maybe we can get some one to help us," said Robin. "There must be other people up here. And why can't we start the seeds in boxes in the house while we're building the fence?"

"That's a capital idea, Sis. And, by the way, how about said seeds? Of course you've got some in Mrs. Robinson's bag?" Don inquired banteringly.

"I'm afraid I haven't, except some flower and herb seeds," confessed Robin, as much ashamed as if this were not the very first failure of the magic trunk.

"Oh, it's all right if you've got those," Jerry told her reassuringly. "We can live on nasturtium blossom salad and sage tea!"

"Of course it doesn't matter," said Don. "We can send to Minersville; or maybe they'll have all we need in Angel Flat. We ought to be about it, though."

"Let's wait till to-night to talk of business," protested Robin. "There's so much to see yet this morning. And oh — I must stop to pick some of these dear flowers! Tell me about them, Maggie — I'm sure you know them all."

Maggie's brown cheeks glowed with pride. "I guess I do — most of them," she admitted modestly. "Gran'pa used to tell me their names. Those little purple ones you've got in your hand are 'roosters.'"

"Roosters!" exclaimed horrified Robin. "These lovely little things that look as if they'd been turned inside out? See, boys, how prettily the petals curve back over the stem, just like — I have it! They're surely own cousins to the cyclamen we used to have in the flower-window at home!"

"I never heard them called 'si-cul-men,'" said Maggie, "but some folks call 'em 'shooting stars.'"

"There, Robin, that's poetic enough, even for you," commented Jerry. "What are these little blue fellows, Maggie?" he added, stooping to gather a handful of low-growing, cup-shaped flowers, just the color of the California sky.

"Those are 'baby blue eyes,' " explained Maggie, and "Oh, there's a 'bloody-nose!' " she cried in delight, spying a dash of vivid scarlet beside the wagon track.

"Bloody-nose! What corkers of names the flowers out here do have!"

"Never mind, Don, it can't spoil their beauty," said Robin, rapturously, as she added the bit of rich color to her gay bouquet.

Robin's love for flowers was almost a passion, and with each new one discovered this happy morning she felt that she had made another friend in the new home. It was indeed a land of flowers, and the blossom season was nearly at its height. Graceful wild hyacinths, purple-blue and delicately fragrant, dear little gold-cups that looked like tiny, furry-petaled tulips, wild pansies, larkspurs in vary-

ing shades of lavender, pink, and blue, buttercups that might have come straight from a Summerville meadow, trailing sprays of Indian carpet, — all these and many more filled Robin's delighted hands to overflowing.

In gathering them she and her brothers and Maggie wandered over all the cleared part of the ranch. They lingered an hour in the open grassy acres through which the small brook chattered so pleasantly; they stopped to pat little gray rabbit-eared Stubby, who was straying about at his own sweet will, browsing the fresh green grass; finally they rambled up into the edge of the forest that clothed the mountain-side which Jerry flippantly named "Our Back Yard."

It was not easy walking here, for dense underbrush choked the spaces among the lofty trees; wild gooseberry and blackberry briers snatched vigorously at passing garments, and where the slope was not rough and stony it was slippery with pine needles. Moreover, mountain climbing was a new pastime for the easterners, for Summerville had been well away from anything but low hills, and they had never traveled till now far from home.

"I think I'll have to give up for this morning," gasped Robin, apologetically, at last. "I can find my way down to the house all right, and the rest of you can go on to see the waterfall." For Maggie had told them of a pretty little cascade higher up, but still within the limits of their domain, where the brook took a leap of ten or fifteen feet over a mossy

boulder, and where the ferns grew "higher than gran'pa's head."

"I guess we'd better all go back," panted Don, mopping his brow with a handkerchief that had been rent to tatters on a particularly pugnacious brier. "The falls will keep, won't they, Maggie? You mustn't expect too much of us tenderfeet at first."

"Do your feet hurt?" asked Maggie, sympathetically, and was much chagrined at the burst of laughter that greeted her innocent query.

Scrambling down hill proved to be almost as breathless a performance as climbing up, and they were not sorry to emerge at last from the woods and find themselves on the gently sloping open above the brook meadow and the Robin's Nest.

But before they had really had time to recover their breath, they made a discovery that took it away again.

"Who's that man sitting on our porch?" asked Jerry, in low-voiced surprise, and everybody stared in the direction indicated. The long, spare, roughly clad figure, the white whiskers and jetty eyebrows, and the great black and white cat on his knee, left no room for doubt. It was Larry Jukes!

CHAPTER VII

THE STURTEVANDT PRIDE

"THE impudent old scoundrel!" exclaimed irreverent Jerry.

"Hush, dear, he'll hear you!" warned Robin.

"Don't care if he does. Guess you've forgotten how he left us in the middle of the road the night we came. Let's go down and bounce him."

"We'll do nothing of the sort, my son!" declared Don, with exasperating serenity. "I guess *you've* forgotten how decently he treated us on the way up —that is, most of the time. And if he did dump us into the chaparral at the end of the trip, you'll have to admit it was square of him to come back and carry in our traps when he saw it was getting ready to rain."

"I'll bet a cookie he didn't do it!" answered Jerry, defiantly.

"Oh, of course, if the little boy still believes in fairies— Come on, Robin!"

Very much ruffled by this last insult to his fifteen years, and by what he considered his brother's and sister's lack of proper pride, Jerry turned to Maggie for sympathy.

From the first these two had been growing fast and congenial friends, and the trace of patronizing

condescension in the lad's manner seemed rather to increase than to detract from Maggie's whole-hearted admiration. To Jerry, used to having his whims and projects laughed at or frowned upon by his less impulsive elders, the little girl's seconding of even his wildest fancies was very flattering.

"*You're* with me, Peggy, aren't you?" he asked, and an answering flash of a pair of eyes much like his, but a shade or two darker, assured him that she was, indeed. In fact, Maggie could not forget so soon an aversion taught her almost from babyhood, or look calmly on at the sight of grandpa's dearest foe seated tranquilly on the porch of what was still, to her, grandpa's house.

So, strengthened by each other's approval, the younger members of the Robin's Nest quartet turned their backs on the older two and retired to Stubby's shed to sulk.

Jerry was glowering through the window at unconscious Robin and Don, who were by this time shaking hands with old Larry in the most disgustingly cordial fashion.

"I'd rather be back in New York," the boy commented plaintively, "than to have to stand by and see my own brother and sister toadying to that white-headed old villain of a trunk-dumper!"

"I'm afraid you oughtn't to talk so," said Maggie, a little shocked at his vehemence. "And I'd like to know where *I'd* have been if you *had* stayed in New York?"

Jerry regarded his cousin thoughtfully.

"That's so," he admitted. "It would have been awful for a Sturtevandt to go to the poor-house at Angel. We Sturtevandts, you know, Maggie, are one of the proudest families in America."

"What are we proud of?" inquired Maggie, wondering if Great-grandma Sturtevandt's skill in the line of wax and hair had anything to do with it.

"Why, the Sturtevandts—" began Jerry, "the Sturtevandts—" and stopped, realizing that his knowledge of family history was uncomfortably hazy. "Why shouldn't they be proud? Tell me that!" he demanded suddenly, turning from the window to face his cousin. And then, for Jerry's sense of humor was his saving grace at times, the corners of his mouth began to twitch, his brown eyes to twinkle, and he joined Maggie in a hearty laugh at his own expense.

This so cleared the murky atmosphere that when, a minute later, Don's voice was heard summoning the truants, they emerged from their retreat with their fierce wrath modified into a cool, polite dignity, intended to be very impressive. Larry Jukes, I regret to record, did not appear to be at all impressed, though a gleam of quiet amusement was apparent in the clear blue eyes under the jetty brows.

"Good mornin', young folks," he remarked pleasantly. "I come over to see how y'u liked the far West by now. Homesick any?"

"Not in the least, thank you," replied Jerry,

"WITH MASTER PIG SQUEALING IN HIS ARMS HE DEPARTED"

freezingly. "Though of course California can't hold a candle to ——"

"Don't be uncivil, Jerry," interrupted his sister, anxiously. "You see, Mr. Jukes, the rainy weather has rather soured Jerry's disposition. I'm sure he won't deny that nothing could be lovelier than California is to-day."

"Oh, it might be worse!" condescended Jerry.

"Hain't found that there straight stick o' manzanita yet, have y'u?" inquired the guest in a bantering tone that made Jerry stiffen.

"No, sir," replied the boy, and then a daring look flashed into his eyes as he added: "Nor a gold mine in our back yard, Mr. Jukes. "We're like you—we haven't had our fair share!"

Don and Robin, remembering Larry's peculiarities, caught their breath at this reckless remark, and even naughty Jerry wished he hadn't been so rude, as he watched the genial expression fade from the old man's lips and eyes, and hard, ugly lines come into his weather-beaten face.

Larry rose from his seat on the steps.

"Good mornin'," he remarked grimly. "Tom'n I'll be goin'. We'll not bother y'u any more. When I got back to Twenty Rattles that there night I packed y'u up here, an' heard that Johnnie Sturtevandt was dead, why, I felt sort o' sorry for bein' so rough, an' I come back an' packed in y'ur trunks, an' while I was trampin' home again, I says to myself that mebby we could neighbor a bit. But

I might 'a' knowed we couldn't. I might 'a' knowed I'd never be welcomed by any kin o' Johnnie Sturtevandt's."

"But you *are*, Mr. Jukes!" protested Don. "We want you to come. We don't know nor care what you and Uncle Jonathan had against each other. Now that he's dead and gone, can't you let the old feud die too, and forget that it ever existed?"

"Forget? No, I — can't — forget!" he declared solemnly, and as he spoke he looked past the little group, and his eyes rested sadly, bitterly, on the dark, forest-clad slopes of the "Back Yard." "I'm too old to forget things, I reckon." Then he added, "We'll be goin', Tom. Good-by."

Something smote Jerry's conscience sorely as he watched the old man turn away and go slowly down the steps with wicked old Tom at his heels. Only the false pride which interferes with the carrying out of so many good impulses, kept him silent.

It was Robin who ran after Larry, laid her hand entreatingly on the sleeve of his faded old coat, and begged him so earnestly and with so true a ring in her sweet voice to come back, that the hard lines softened involuntarily in Larry's face, and he half paused, though he did not turn.

Then at last Jerry rose to the occasion manfully. Following Robin down the steps, he approached the old man with outstretched hand and with an expression of genuine penitence on his face.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Jukes," he said, though

it cost an effort. "I *did* try to make you mad, but I'm awfully ashamed of it. Do please come back and be friendly! We'd be very glad if you'd stay to dinner with us, wouldn't we, Robin?"

Robin gave Jerry a look of grateful approval, as she warmly seconded his invitation. But to her puzzled disappointment, Larry shook his head.

"I don't bear the boy no grudge — him nor none of y'u, an' I ain't never had nothin' against Johnnie's little girl. But I can't stop. I reckon Johnnie Sturtevandt 'd turn over in his grave if he knowed of me eatin' in his house."

Here Maggie, fired by Jerry's good example, put in her word.

"I think gran'pa would *like* to have you stay," she said.

Larry turned to her with a harsh laugh.

"An' I think not! Y'ur gran'pa hated me like he did a rattlesnake; an' I him," he added fiercely.

"I know that," Maggie admitted; "but just the same, once when he was so dreadful sick, he talked different."

"What did he say?" demanded Larry Jukes.

"Just your name, over 'n over. But he *said* it different, sort of like he wasn't mad any more. It was just before he died."

"My whole name — was it my whole name he said?" asked Larry, quickly.

"No, just 'Larry,'" replied Maggie.

The old prospector's eyes sought the mountains

again, and Robin fancied that they were clouded with something very like tears.

"Surely you'll stay now," she urged gently.

But to her deep disappointment, Larry again shook his head.

"No, Missy, — y'u're very kind, but I can't see my way clear to enter Johnnie Sturtevandt's house. Not now — nor never. I guess I'll be goin'."

Poor Robin felt too much rebuffed to say another word, and Larry was starting away again, when Jerry came to the rescue with one of the bright ideas for which he was famous.

"Mr. Jukes — oh, Mr. Jukes!" he shouted. "Hold on a second! You haven't any objection to us, you say, but you won't eat inside this house. You wouldn't mind our society at a picnic, I suppose? We'll eat outdoors if you'll only stay!"

"Of course we will — why didn't I think of that before?" cried Robin. "Please stay, Mr. Jukes! We're so alone, and you and Tom are our only acquaintances in California."

Larry hesitated — and was lost. Jerry seized Tom Quartz as a hostage, getting himself well clawed in consequence, and Don dragged away the still half reluctant guest to inspect the rickety bridge and the disused water-gate, and to help him plan a cattle-proof fence and a model garden. In the meantime the girls hurried joyfully indoors to get the picnic dinner ready before the erratic Larry should escape from their clutches.

After all, it was too charming a day to waste indoors, and no one was inclined to complain of the chance that had turned their midday meal into an open-air feast. The impromptu luncheon was served in the shade of one of the big white oaks, shawls and cushions having been spread on the still damp ground. A brimming saucer of undiluted evaporated cream was set for Tom, and even Stubby came trotting up to join the party, and to prove conclusively that he had no fault to find with *Robin's* bread.

And such a change as came over Larry Jukes! The last vestiges of anger and bitterness had vanished. The blue eyes twinkled merrily or flashed with excitement as, in his deep, musical voice, the old Californian told one wild tale after another, or sang quaint songs to a fascinated audience.

The afternoon was half over when Larry rose at last and whistled to Tom Quartz.

"Must you go?" asked Robin, regretfully.

"But you'll surely come often, now," urged Don.

"We can eat outdoors any day, well as not," insisted Jerry, who had by this time utterly forgotten the trunk-dumping episode and the proper pride of the Sturtevandts.

That evening Don and Robin were sitting by a glowing fire in the living-room, for the Sierran evenings are nearly always cool. Jerry and Maggie

were washing up the tea things in the kitchen, with a merry clatter and more or less good-natured squabbling over dish mops and towels.

"Well, Sis," inquired Don, "what do you think of our neighbor?"

"Of Larry Jukes? I — don't — know," mused his sister. "He's certainly interesting, and as certainly a mystery. I wish we knew —— "

"But we don't, and I fancy we never shall," replied Don, studying the fire. "Even Maggie doesn't know what it was between him and Uncle Jonathan that he can't forgive."

"Or else that he can't forget," suggested Robin. "I'm not certain, Don; sometimes it seems to me as if he might have something on his own conscience. There's been a hunted, desperate look in his eyes, just for a flash, once or twice. Haven't you noticed it?"

But Don had to admit that he hadn't.

"It's too much for me. I never was good at solving riddles. I guess we'll have to leave this one to time to solve."

And since time seems the only detective likely to unravel for them or for us the mystery of Larry Jukes, suppose we follow the wise example of the Robin's Nest household, and turn our attention, for the present at least, to other things.

When Jerry and Maggie came in from the kitchen, the evening was spent in lively planning for the work that must now begin in earnest if this stopping-

place in the wilderness was really to be made into a home worthy of the name.

"To-morrow we must do this," and "To-morrow we must see to that," came so often into the conversation, that lazy Jerry finally groaned aloud in apprehended weariness.

"I begin to wish the old saying about to-morrow never coming was true," he remarked pathetically.

Don glanced at the clock.

"It'll come before we're half ready for it if we don't turn in pretty soon, Jerry. I move we go up aloft and let these girls get to bed."

And the motion for adjournment was carried without so much as a yawn of dissent.

CHAPTER VIII

HOME-MAKING

THE next few weeks were full to the brim, and passed swiftly and happily away. Don and Jerry found that their boyish apprenticeship on the old home farm at Summerville was of great value to them now, and in spite of some tragic blunders and many amusing ones, the ranch began under their hands to assume a prosperous and homelike appearance. Robin and Maggie relegated all housework, except the necessary meal-providing, to the occasional rainy days, and grew tanned and hearty helping at all sorts of light tasks out of doors.

Larry Jukes, whose duties at Twenty Rattles did not appear to be very confining, came over often to give the benefit of his advice and assistance, and it was through him that the boys secured a few days' valuable help from a slender, wiry Swiss-Italian lad who hailed from a fabulous region known as "over Grizzly Gap way."

When the garden plot had been pronounced absolutely cattle-proof within its barricade of rails and murderous barbed wire, the whole energy of the family was directed toward planting the garden. Cæsar Silveroli was dispatched over the hills

to borrow his father's plow and harrow, and when he returned, Stubby was harnessed and put to work. Stubby had been a gentleman of leisure for so long that he was inclined at first to rebel, and it took the whole family in combined effort to persuade him to do his part. Jerry asserted that it would have been about as easy to spade the acre or two of ground themselves as it was to drag the obstinate little beast to his hated task.

After the plowing came the planting, and then the days of anxious waiting to see whether things would really come up. Some of the seeds for which they had sent to Angel Flat were already sprouting in boxes and nearly ready to transplant. Pease, beans, lettuce, radishes and onions were soon coming up in long green rows of promise, and so zealous a watch did the young agriculturists keep over the progress of their garden, that Larry declared they knew their plantlets individually, and could tell precisely how many new leaves had unfolded on each over night.

Cæsar, taking a friendly interest in affairs at the Robin's Nest Ranch, came over one evening with a big basketful of treasures, roots of rhubarb and garden herbs, a few tomato plants, and some sturdy young hop vines to plant about the porch for shade.

Robin had not forgotten the flower seeds which she had brought with her, and already her sweet-pease and nasturtiums, pansies and asters and mi-

gnonette, were well above ground and doing their best to grow fast and reward her loving devotion.

When the garden was well under way and before the weeds had begun to keep them busy, Don and Jerry spent a number of days improving the appearance of the place; patching Stubby's tumble-down shed into quite an elegant mansion; making bonfires of the odds and ends of rubbish that had accumulated about Uncle Jonathan's back door; thinning the underbrush and trimming the trees, cutting the grass, and doing the hundred and one things that would have seemed foolishness to an easy-going, shiftless mountaineer, but which were counted indispensable by the children of thrifty New England.

Up to this time there had been no live stock, save Stubby, on the ranch, but one Sunday afternoon Larry Jukes strolled over the bridge and up the drive, with mystery on his face and on his arm a covered basket. This he handed to Robin, and the others gathered around to watch as she raised the lid.

"Cluck — cluck — cluck!" came from within in indignant protest.

"Oh, boys, it's a hen! A dear, old, motherly Plymouth Rock hen!" and then, as Robin put in her hand to stroke soothingly the soft, speckled back, first one and then another little downy head was poked curiously out from under the sheltering wings.

"They's fifteen of 'em," explained Larry, proudly.

"She just come off this morning. I've got three more a-settin', so I thought I'd just pack her an' her fambly right along over here. Y'u're very welcome — don't say no more about it," he added protestingly, embarrassed by their expressions of gratitude. The next day a roomy coop was manufactured out of a box, and Madam Plymouth Rock settled down to housekeeping in the most contented way.

Jerry was responsible for the next addition to the live stock of the ranch. One morning he and Stubby departed in the direction of the Silveroli ranch on some mysterious errand which they refused to divulge. It was nearly supper time when they returned, and Don and Robin were waiting rather anxiously at the bridge when they came in sight.

"What in the world ——" began Robin in puzzled tones, but Don's shout of amusement interrupted her question.

Stubby was wandering along very much as he chose, both his rider's arms being more than occupied with their struggling, kicking burden.

"It's a pig!" cried Robin, as the boy and the burro drew nearer. "A live pig, Don! Whatever shall we do with it?"

"Feed it on condensed cream at ten cents a meal," Don replied resignedly.

But poor Jerry was so elated over his purchase and so confident that the four bits he had spent was well invested, that the others hadn't the heart to laugh at him.

"We'll feed him on scraps from the table, you know," explained Jerry; "and as soon as he's a little bigger, we can turn him loose and he'll live on roots and acorns and things. That's what the Silverolis do with their pigs. They snip their ears so they can tell them from other people's — just like branding ponies."

"Who's going to do the snipping in this case?" asked Robin, with a little shudder.

"Jerry is, of course," replied Don. "Run, get your scissors, Sis, and I'll hold his pigship while Jerry snips."

As was to have been expected, soft-hearted Jerry fairly turned pale at the thought. Silveroli pigs with ears already snipped were one thing, and an Arnold pig with soft pink ears waiting meekly to be lacerated was quite another.

"I'll tell you what," he suggested, thankfully clutching at a straw, "we'll put a strap around his neck for a collar. That'll identify him!"

"Bright idea!" exclaimed Don. "And we'll tie a red ribbon on the strap, just to make sure. I'm willing to wager there won't be another pig like him in the Sierras."

But Jerry was not to be dissuaded from his plan by Don's teasing. With Master Pig squealing in his arms, he departed in search of a strap.

Whether or not it was the refining influence of the crimson bow which Jerry's pet henceforth wore, I cannot attempt to say, but certain it is that Oliver

Twist — it was his habit of calling for more, and the quirk to his tail, that earned him his name — developed into a model for his race. In the first place, he was that apparent contradiction — a pig with no leaning toward mud-holes and leisure. He spent his time rambling over the mountain-sides, grunting cheerfully to himself, occasionally sprawling in some open, rocky place to bask in the hot sun and possibly to dream of the curly-tailed brothers and sisters he had left squealing and squabbling in the Silveroli sty. At meal time he invariably came home, grunting joyful greeting to his owners, and reeking with the aromatic odor of the tar-weed through which he had been roaming. He followed Jerry about like a dog, and would have come into the house gladly if Robin had not made and enforced an iron-clad rule against his admission.

"Now if we only had a cow," said Jerry, one evening, "our ranch would be complete."

"My happiness would be complete, at any rate," responded Robin. "I can't help it, boys. I know you think I'm fastidious, but I *can't* learn to like this milk that comes in cans."

"I can't learn to like to pay for it. It's awful, the way a case goes in no time. I believe Jerry feeds it to his beloved pig on the sly," complained Don, who, as financial manager of the home-making enterprise, had anxieties of his own.

Jerry scorned to reply to his brother's insinuation, but remarked thoughtfully:—

"We might buy a cow, Don. It wouldn't be a bad investment. By turning the water on the grass this side of the brook occasionally, we could keep a fairly good pasture all summer, for Larry says the spring that feeds that brook of ours never goes dry. And with the scythe we could cut a lot of grass along the river valley, now, before it dries up. Cows eat hay, I suppose."

"Yes," said Robin, "and we could plant carrots and things for her in our garden, and when our sweet corn grows big enough to use, she could have the stalks and leaves for fodder."

"I do believe it would be economy, Don," declared Jerry, eagerly. "It wouldn't only save our buying condensed milk, but we could make our own butter instead of buying this expensive creamery stuff from Minersville. And if we had more skim milk than we could use, we could get another pig or two and fatten them to sell."

"You're very plausible, Jerry," said Don, "but there's one difficulty about your plan."

"What's that?"

"Simply that we can't possibly afford to buy a cow now. We're running awfully low in funds, old man, and we can't go into even a good investment until we have a little more money to invest."

"And where's that coming from, I'd like to know?" queried Jerry, despairingly.

"Oh, I'm not discouraged—don't get that idea," protested Don, cheerfully. "We'll pull through

some way, though it may be hard sliding for a year or two. Larry says if our garden does well, he's sure we can sell all the truck we can't use to the boarding-house at Twenty Rattles. And this fall I mean to put in some fruit trees and berry bushes and currants,—yes, and a strawberry bed. It will decrease our expenses and increase our income to have fruit on the ranch."

"But in the meantime, have we money enough to last us through the summer, Don?"

"I can tell you exactly how much we have, Robin." The boy drew a note-book from his pocket, opened it, did a little mental calculation, and announced: "We have, here and in the bank at Minersville, just ninety-three dollars and forty-seven cents."

"But, Don," exclaimed Robin, in surprise, "that's ever so much more than I thought! I'm sure you told me there was less than a hundred several weeks ago, and we've had to buy a lot of provisions since then, beside paying Cæsar for the work he did. Had you made a mistake?"

"No, Sis, I hadn't made a mistake. I suppose I might as well tell you what I've done, though I'd rather not." If Don had been stealing money to swell their fund he could hardly have looked more embarrassed. There are certain natures, and Don's was one of them, that find it harder to confess a generous action than a mean or selfish one. "I just sold something that belonged to me, that's all."

"What was it, dear?" asked Robin, much puzzled.

"My stamp book," said Don. "I got twenty dollars for it."

"Not really, Don? Say, you're an old brick!" cried Jerry, but Robin's eyes filled with sudden tears.

"You oughtn't to have done it, you dear, good boy," she said, laying her arm lovingly about his shoulders. The three were resting together in the twilight on the steps of the porch, and she was sitting just above him. "You had worked for years over your collection, and it was worth far more than twenty dollars to you."

"No it wasn't; not now," maintained Don, stoutly. "I *did* rather hate to see the old thing go, but I haven't had a regret since; at least," he added truthfully, "I haven't yet wished that I hadn't done it."

"Who bought it?" asked Jerry.

"Some agent in New York. I wrote to Mr. Smedley to know if he could sell it for me, and the letter I had from him last week enclosed a check and told me to send it along at once."

"That's why you wouldn't show me the letter! I wondered what was in it! Don, if we ever get rich ——"

But before Robin had had time to tell what would happen when the Arnold family's ship came in, there came an interruption. Maggie, who had wandered down along the river to see if she could catch a trout or two for supper, came flying up the drive in evident excitement.

CHAPTER IX

"WINDFALL"

"Oh, come quick, everybody!" Maggie was shouting. "There's a poor little calf down by the river, that can't walk. I reckon it's broke its leg!"

The others jumped up at once, and hurried after her down the grassy wagon track.

It was several weeks now since the cattle from "down Minersville way" had been brought up and turned loose in the mountains, and the Arnolds had grown used to the monotonous, musical tinkle of the cow-bells, growing fainter or louder as the herd roamed farther away or nearer.

The injured calf was found hobbling painfully and slowly through the chaparral, bleating pitifully after its mother. The latter, puzzled, but unwilling to wait, pushed on through the underbrush, lowing impatiently to her little one to follow, for the tinkling bells of the herd were going ever farther and farther away down the river.

"Poor little thing!" cried Robin, pityingly. "That cruel mother will be out of its sight in a minute more. Go and drive her back, Jerry, do!"

"Don't you suppose she would come back of her own accord when she saw the calf really wasn't

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coming?" asked Don, while Jerry and Maggie departed as quietly as possible to head off the deserting parent.

"Maybe she would, but only to keep urging it along. I suppose she can't understand what the trouble is, and she knows she ought to join the herd."

It was evident enough that the calf had been hurt by a fall, for one of its red and white sides was covered with mud. There were enough rugged, precipitous places along the river bed to account easily for such an accident. It had given up the struggle now, and was lying down in discouragement. Don went up to it quietly, rubbed its soft neck with a reassuring touch, and began to feel quietly down along the injured leg.

"It isn't broken, I think," he announced to Robin, who stood looking on. "It's just badly cut and bruised, and sprained, too, I dare say, here at the joint where it's so swollen."

"What shall we do with it, Don? We can't leave it here to die."

"If it were mine, I should say the kindest thing would be to shoot it; but of course we don't want to take the matter into our own hands like that."

"We might take it home and nurse it till it's well again," Robin suggested.

"And feed it on evaporated cream?" asked Don. "We've adopted a child, and a donkey, and a hen, and a pig, already, Robin. I think a calf would just about finish us financially."

"I know you're right, Don, but ——"

"Clear the track!" shouted a triumphant voice from the chaparral. "We'll see about this child-deserting business! So, there, old lady, don't step on my heels!"

And Jerry emerged from the underbrush, not driving, but leading the docile mother by one of her shapely horns.

"I didn't have a bit of trouble catching her. She must have been a pet," explained the boy. "Now where's her infant?"

"M-a-a-a-a-!" bleated the baby, pleadingly, trying its best to get to its feet.

"What *shall* we do, Don?" cried Robin, in distress.

"Do!" exclaimed Jerry. "Why, there's only one thing to be done, of course. I've sent Maggie for a rope and we're going to take Madam Cow and her spoiled child up to Stubby's shed and leave them there for the night. To-morrow we can see what is to be done."

Jerry's suggestion seemed so sensible that it was adopted at once. Maggie came hurrying back with a rope, which was tied around the mother's tawny neck. The calf was gently helped to its feet, and encouraged to limp, slowly and painfully, after its mother up the slope to Stubby's shed, where a bed of dried grass was spread for it to lie upon. By this time darkness had set in, and after shutting and fastening the door of the shed, and explaining

to Stubby that he must, in the interests of hospitality, do the best he could outdoors that night, the young people trooped indoors to eat their supper, and talk over the incident.

When they went out next morning to see how their unexpected guests had passed the night, they found the calf still lying on the straw, evidently unable or unwilling to rise.

"It won't even get up for its breakfast, Robin," said Don. "Just see how full of milk the poor mother's bag is! It's bad for her to go without milking."

"Can't you milk, Don?" asked Jerry.

"I never tried but once, and that time I didn't make a howling success of it; but my hands are stronger now. At least I can try. Run in and get the tin pail, won't you, Jerry, while I cut some grass for her to eat."

The pretty Jersey did not seem to object in the least to her captivity, and while she stood quietly munching the green grass Don had brought her, he, with some misgivings, undertook to milk her. He soon found his hands growing tired at the unaccustomed task, but he persevered until every drop of the rich, warm milk was in his pail, filling it nearly full.

"Now, then, baby, take your breakfast lying down, since you're so luxurious," he remarked, carrying the pail across to the bed of hay where the calf was lying. The latter looked up at him

with big, soft eyes, bleated a pathetic little "M-a-a-!" but made no attempt to drink.

"Is it too sick, do you think?" asked Jerry.

"I don't believe so. I think it's just that it has never learned to take its meals second hand. We'll have to teach it."

After a few minutes' coaxing and explaining, the little creature was persuaded to dip its nose into the pail and try. Perhaps bumps and bruises are destructive to appetite. At any rate, the calf, in spite of urging, drank hardly a quart of its breakfast. "I've had plenty, thank you," it insisted, plainly enough, turning its fawn-like head from side to side, to avoid the pail which was being thrust upon it.

"My!" exclaimed Don, regretfully. "If I'd known you hadn't any more appetite than that I'd never have let you stick your nose into that whole pailful. I wouldn't have minded a bowl of real milk for my own breakfast, would you, Robin?"

"Oliver Twist will have to have what's left — lucky dog!" said Jerry. And Oliver Twist got it, except for a little that was saved in case the calf should change its mind before Nature had provided a fresh supply.

After his own breakfast, Don hurried up the mile of river road that lay between the Robin's Nest and Larry Jukes' shack. Finding that the old man was at home and not busy, he brought him back to examine the injured calf and suggest what was to be done with it.

After a hasty examination of the injured leg, Larry expressed his opinion pointedly.

"All right for veal — not much good any other ways."

"But we can't kill him, Mr. Jukes," said Don. "That's out of the question."

"We haven't any right to — it isn't our calf," said Jerry.

"Right! Right!" exclaimed Larry, fiercely. "Y'u're always talkin' about things y'u don't know nothin' about. Possession's nine points o' the law. Kill the critter an' eat it, an' say nothin' to nobody. What's a calf more or less to the owner of a herd? An' don't they pasture their beasts on our mountains half the year? Tell me that!"

"Let's not discuss the matter, Mr. Jukes," put in Robin, quickly. "My brothers and I are quite agreed that we have no right to kill the little thing if there's a chance of its getting well. We sent for you, thinking you might know what to do for it. Don't you? Couldn't we fix its poor little leg?"

Larry's bad temper subsided, as it usually did when Robin spoke. He began to examine the hurt leg more closely, and said he didn't know but it might get well, if the calf were kept quiet and not dragged over the mountains by its mother. With Don's help he washed and dressed the cuts and bruises, bandaging one ugly wound that had started in afresh to bleed. After the treatment, the patient

seemed so willing to lie quiet on its bed, that the prospect for its recovery grew quite encouraging.

"And now," said Don, as the party walked back toward the house, "what's going to be done with the cow? We can't take care of the calf without her assistance, that's sure."

"Why can't we picket her out with a long rope daytimes, and keep her in the shed nights?" asked Jerry. "Her owner couldn't possibly object to that. She'll be enough sight better off than roaming the mountains and beginning to starve as soon as the dry weather begins."

"I really can't see," pondered Don, "that there would be anything out of the way in our keeping them all summer, or at least as long as we've any kind of fodder. Then if there's more milk than the calf needs, I see no good reason why we shouldn't use it in return for what we've done. That's fair, isn't it?"

"Fair!" exclaimed Larry, "o' course it's fair. An' let me tell y'u that that there calf will learn to eat grass its own self pretty soon, an' then y'u can have all the milk. The cow would just go dry if she was left to roam, but if she's milked reg'lar, she'll give y'u milk all summer. An' in the fall, when the herd is drove down below again, y'u can just turn her loose an' she'll join 'em, her an' her young 'un. An' I'll bet Tom Quartz' whiskers that they'll be the best lookin' critters in the bunch by then!"

Indeed there was something so providential in the way the longed-for cow had been supplied, that it would have seemed ungrateful, as well as foolish, to refuse to follow out Larry's suggestion. Stubby was therefore permanently exiled from the shed, where, to tell truth, he had spent few hours out of the twenty-four; the grass was harvested for a considerable distance up and down stream; and Madam Cow and her red and white son became established and valued residents of the Robin's Nest Ranch. The calf recovered rapidly, but neither it nor its mother showed any desire to break loose and stray away from the pleasant home they had found. When the hot, dry weeks began, and green things became harder and harder to find, the herd from which the cow and calf had become separated wandered farther and farther back into the range in search of forage, and, for a while, the monotonous tinkle of cow-bells was hushed.

"Windfall," as every one agreed she should be named, proved to be an excellent milker, and one great problem of their subsistence was solved, to the relief of Don's financial anxiety and the rescue of Robin's appetite. Robin managed to accumulate enough cream to make butter at least once every week: enough, with economy, to supply their needs. And in spite of this, and of an occasional skim-milk treat to Oliver Twist, the little calf whose timely accident had resulted so happily, prospered and waxed fat.

At first Robin tried to persuade Larry Jukes to take from them what milk he could use, but he refused absolutely. He didn't like cow's milk — couldn't go it, he explained. He'd used the canned variety so many years that the real thing tasted queer to him. And as Tom Quartz, too, evinced this strange preference, a supply of evaporated cream was kept on hand against the rare occasions when Jonathan Sturtevandt's young relatives entertained his ancient enemy outside the never-to-be-crossed threshold of the Robin's Nest.

CHAPTER X

JERRY GOES PROSPECTING

"JERRY, I guess we'll see about that water-gate this morning. It needs some tinkering, and we ought to have it in good shape before it comes time to irrigate our garden." Don critically examined the edge of a saw as he spoke. "And if you have time," he went on, "you might sharpen the ax and slice a few chips off the old pitch-pine. Robin's kindling box is low."

Waiting in vain for his brother's usual good-natured grumble of protest, Don looked up inquiringly. Jerry's face wore an expression of unflinching determination.

"Thanks awfully, Mr. Slave-driver, but I'm going to take a day off. We can't possibly need to turn the water on our garden yet awhile, and Robin's got chips enough to last a month — till to-morrow, anyway. I've got some business of my own to attend to this morning."

"Such as what?" asked Don.

"Business of *my own!*" emphasized Jerry, with dignity. "Avoid curiosity, Donnie. It's unbecoming in one so young. I'll be back for supper, at the latest, and it's just possible that I may have

something to say by then." With this he turned on his heel and went into the house, whence he presently emerged with his fishing-rod in his hand and with a paper-wrapped parcel peeping out of one coat pocket and Robin's tack-hammer out of the other.

"Whatever you do, Jerry, don't bring us another pig!" Don shouted after his brother, as the latter strode down the road toward the bridge.

"And do be careful not to get lost!" cried Robin, from the doorway.

A scornful silence was Jerry's only reply to these needless warnings, as he crossed the bridge and disappeared among the alders.

"What *do* you suppose the crazy boy is up to now, Don?" asked the crazy boy's sister, with an amused little frown wrinkling her brow. But Don cautiously refused to venture an opinion.

After crossing the bridge, Jerry turned to the right, and, striking into a thicket of azaleas and willows, followed the winding course of the river for a mile or more downstream. There was no trail to guide him, save an almost overgrown cow-path, and his progress was slow and difficult. The gay, dancing ripples of the Mercedes outstripped him easily, laughing musically past as they left him distanced in the underbrush. The May morning was hot, now that the sun was well above the moun-

tains, and Jerry's hair clung in damp disorder to his forehead and his tanned cheeks were flushed with exertion when at last he came out into an open glade a hundred yards or more across, where the river grew suddenly sedate and paused to linger and dream awhile in a deep basin it had carved from its rocky bed. Green grass sloped down before him, quite to the margin of the stream. One great live-oak spread its broad evergreen branches over the calm pool, and farther down the stream a clump of azaleas leaned close over the crystal mirror, as if to admire the exquisite pink of the blossom-clusters with which they were adorned. So clear was the water of the pool that the smooth pebbles at the bottom shimmered in the sunlight as if the bed of the stream were paved with jewels, and darting fishes gleamed by in silvery flashes. This was one of the finest trout pools in the river, as Jerry had discovered a week before. He had no intention of going home without a fine string of trout for supper. However, fishing was only a side issue to-day. Weightier business had brought Jerry Arnold to this beautiful, solitary spot.

Laying his rod on the grass under the live-oak he turned round slowly, searching minutely with his eyes the edge of the woods that sloped down on every side to this sunny little open. Nothing stirred. The barking of a fox far down the ravine and the piping of a covey of quail high up on the mountain slope across the stream, seemed only to intensify

the silence. Jerry was quite satisfied that there was no other human being within a mile of the place. Following the margin of the river to a point just above the group of blossoming azaleas, he walked cautiously across a half decayed log to the opposite bank.

This shore was not smooth and grassy like the one he had left. Great granite boulders jostled one another, and the spaces between them were filled with sand, fragments of rock, and drift that the spring freshets had cast there.

Jerry picked his way carefully among these giant cobblestones, his eyes searching the ground. Then he stopped short, with a low ejaculation of satisfaction, and dropped to his knees beside an outcropping ledge of rather peculiar-looking rock. Among the grays and blues and whites of granite, slate, and quartz, this ledge stood out conspicuously, for it was of a dull red color, and the sunlight, falling full upon it, was caught and reflected in a thousand tiny flashes.

Jerry had discovered this rock one afternoon a week before, when he had been at the pool, fishing, and it had been haunting his memory ever since. He had been waiting only an opportunity to come back and examine it by daylight, for the sun had been well behind the western buttes on the occasion when he had come upon it.

What if it should prove to be gold! That was the thought that had been in his mind all the week.

What if he had discovered a mine that would restore the fortunes of the Arnold family!

Jerry was not fond of money for its own sake. To tell the truth, he had always had an easy, lavish manner of disposing of all that came into his hands that had made his elders shake their heads and regret that he had no proper appreciation of its value. But just now its usefulness and great desirability appealed to him as it never had done before. As often happens, he had learned to appreciate a blessing only by its loss.

Oh, what a host of anxieties it would put to rest if he could suddenly fatten the family pocket-book by a little contribution of — well, let us be modest, — a thousand dollars, or two, or three!

Jerry knew that Don was fretting about their affairs, for though he never spoke to his brother or sister in anything but his usual hopeful way, he would often toss and mutter in his sleep, and more than once Jerry had caught disjointed sentences that showed how heavily the unaccustomed burden of responsibility was lying on the lad's young shoulders.

Then there was Robin, brave Robin, whose sunny cheerfulness never failed, and who was daily performing many a hard and uncongenial task. Jerry had watched rebelliously the roughening of the pretty white hands that were so much better suited to winning sweet music from the keys of the old piano of Summerville days than to scrubbing the

uncarpeted floors of the Robin's Nest, or wringing his and Don's shirts out of tubfuls of scalding suds. To Jerry's leisurely, pleasure-loving nature, the sacrifices Robin had had to make seemed far more serious than they did to her. Save for an occasional hour of worry or homesickness, she was very happy in her new home, and would have laughed at her brother had she dreamed he was pitying her.

Irresponsible and indolent though Jerry certainly was, he was none the less warm-hearted and generous, and all the first floor of the air castle he had been founding on a ledge of reddish rock was planned for his brother and sister, with a nice little chamber for Maggie, filled with books and dolls and pretty frocks, and all the bright things that had been left out of her lonely mountain childhood. But, after comfortably establishing his relatives, Jerry had proceeded to add a tower or two for his own private occupancy. These apartments were furnished with what might have seemed to an unsympathetic outsider a rather confusing and disorderly array of rifles and rods, tennis racquets and golf sticks, banjos and boxing-gloves, and complete sets of the works of his favorite authors. And the dining-room of this notable structure was provided with viands for which his fastidious soul had been yearning during the weeks that his honest boyish appetite had had to satisfy itself with plain and monotonous fare.

Jerry felt that he knew a good deal about mining matters. He had talked with Larry Jukes on the

subject frequently, and he had studied the specimens of rock with which Uncle Jonathan had left the mantel heaped. One reason, indeed, for Jerry's confidence that there was something worth while about this discovery of his, was the fact that among the specimens that his great-uncle had collected was one small piece, labeled: "Oxidized ore from Twenty Rattles," that was in color exceedingly like this ledge.

Jerry's faith in his mine had waxed so great during the past few days of brooding over possibilities, that his eyes were shining with excitement, and his hands shaking with eagerness now, as he bent to examine more closely the red outcrop. Taking Robin's little hammer from his pocket, he struck a projecting edge till a fragment cracked off and fell into his hand.

But before he had had time to glance at it, he was startled suddenly to his feet, and hammer and specimen fell among the stones with a great clatter.

"Hello!" said an unfamiliar, but not unfriendly voice across the river.

CHAPTER XI

AND MAKES A STRIKE

JERRY'S first thought was that some one had followed and spied upon him, and he whirled angrily on the intruder, but a glance was enough to convince him that his suspicions were groundless. The young man who reclined lazily on the grass across the river, with an open book and a fishing-rod near his elbow, had evidently just awakened from a sound nap. He must have been there all the time, but the clump of azaleas behind which he lay had completely screened him at the time of Jerry's preliminary survey.

"Out prospecting?" yawned the stranger, eyeing Jerry with sleepy curiosity. "I think you must have spoiled my nap, slamming away with your hammer at that old mica ledge."

"That old — what?" demanded Jerry, faintly, but defiantly. And then, somehow, his air castle came down with such a crash that it was a wonder if the young man across the river didn't hear the racket. Perhaps he did catch a far echo from the catastrophe. At any rate, he sat up with a wider-awake expression in his eyes and studied Jerry more closely than he had done before.

"Suppose you come on over here and tell me what's up," he suggested pleasantly. "I'm Forrest — engineer at Twenty Rattles. And I don't loaf for a living, you understand. I'm just taking a day off."

Jerry crossed his precarious bridge and shook hands with Mr. Forrest, who had in the meantime gotten to his feet.

"And I'm Jerry Arnold, from the Robin's Nest Ranch, if you know where that is."

Mr. Forrest frowned down at Jerry in a puzzled way.

"I can't say that I do. Near here, is it?"

"'Bout a mile back up this river. It's where John Sturtevandt used to live."

"Oh!" The puzzled look gave place to one of amused interest. "I guess maybe I do know something about the Robin's Nest, after all, but Larry Jukes never told me its name. You came from the East, didn't you? And isn't there a sister? Larry always waxes so vaguely eloquent when he gets to her, that my impressions aren't at all clear."

Jerry was not in the habit of opening his heart to strangers or discussing his affairs with them. In fact, even with Don and Robin he was often reserved to the point of reticence concerning things about which he felt most deeply. Therefore it was something of a shock to himself, half an hour later, to find that he had been talking to this tall young man with the thoughtful, humorous eyes, as to a bosom friend of

long standing. He became suddenly embarrassed, and broke off abruptly, with an apologetic:—

"I don't know why I'm telling you all this stuff. I guess because you kept still and acted sort of interested. It's your own fault if you've been bored to death."

Mr. Forrest smiled. "You needed a safety-valve, and I happened along — that's how it came about. But you needn't regret having made a confidant of me," he added soberly. "I've known, too, what it was to be left alone in the world, and I wasn't so lucky as you, by a long shot, Jerry Arnold. I just had to hustle around and get what I could out of life for myself, after *my* father died. I never had a brother or sister to stand by me."

"Come over and live with us at the Robin's Nest, and I'll let you have part of Don and Robin!" cried Jerry, with all the reckless hospitality for which he was famous.

Jerry's new friend laughed — a merry, boyish laugh that went to prove its owner not so many years Jerry's senior — a dozen at the very outside.

"Not so fast, young man! Your brother and sister might have a thing or two to say about your adopting a new member into the family without consulting them. And how do you know that I wouldn't disgrace you all? Maybe I'm a rascal in disguise!"

Jerry raised a pair of critical dark eyes to Forrest's gray ones, and the two studied each other

in silence for a moment. Then Jerry remarked thoughtfully:—

"I don't know *how* I know that you're all right, but I do. And I'm positive Don and Robin would like to have you come to see us, anyway, — if you want to, that is."

"I do want to very badly, if you're quite sure — "

"Sure?" interrupted Jerry. "Of course I'm sure. Robin's always tickled to death to see my friends, and Don's such a sensible old chap that I know he'd like you down to the ground!" Here Jerry giggled reminiscently. "There's only one fellow I ever took home that they weren't precisely cordial to— that was Oliver."

"Oliver — who?" asked the other, looking a little concerned, as if fearing that his reception might be like the unfortunate Oliver's.

"Oh, I'll introduce you to him some day. He stayed, you see, and Don and Robin are quite reconciled to him now!" That was all the satisfaction Jerry would give.

The warm spring afternoon passed swiftly by as the man and the lad lay on the river bank under the shadow of the great live-oak, fishing and chatting, and getting better acquainted with every hour that passed. The sun was well started on the downward stretch of his daily journey when Jerry remembered suddenly the lunch he had brought. Pulling the parcel from his pocket, he insisted on sharing its contents with his companion, though the latter

protested that there was hardly enough for two, and that he had meant to get back to the mine before this.

"Did your sister make this bread?" asked Mr. Forrest, regarding the sandwich from which he had just taken a large bite.

"She certainly did," replied Jerry.

"And this cookie, I suppose?" holding up a deliciously brown and sugary one to Jerry's puzzled gaze.

"Of course she made it. What's the matter with 'em?" demanded the latter, pugnaciously.

"The matter with 'em! Young fellow, I don't believe you half appreciate your blessings! These things taste like home. There's a genuine down-east flavor about them that makes me homesick. I haven't tasted a cookie like this since I struck California, — anyway, not since I've been living at the Twenty Rattles Café."

"Don't get anything fit to eat up there, I suppose?" queried Jerry, sympathetically.

"Well, hardly so bad as that — when we have a cook. Just now we are waiting for a new one from Minersville, and Larry Jukes is doing his worst for us in the meantime. Larry means well, and likes to putter about, but nature meant him for a prospector — never a cook."

Jerry's own epicurean tastes made him peculiarly sensitive to the tragedy of the situation.

"Well, I'm awfully sorry for you. I like good

food pretty well myself. How long is it since your cook left?"

"Long enough so I'm perilously near starvation. Two weeks to-day, if I remember. The worst of it is, it looks as if it would be six more before the cook Mr. Abbott has engaged — he's superintendent of the mine, you know — can get here. Her husband is down with typhoid fever at Minersville. He's a man who used to run a drill for us here a year or two ago. He's been getting married since then. I don't know anything about his wife, but Mr. Abbott said she looked very capable. Mr. Abbott engaged the two of them the last time he was in town, and they were coming up the next week, but then poor Smith got down with the fever, and the doctor says he can't work for at least another six weeks. So there you are!"

Probably the anticipation of six weeks more of Larry's eccentric cooking was responsible for the deep feeling with which he added, as he accepted Jerry's proffer of half the last doughnut:—

"Really, Jerry, I can't think of any kinder thing your sister could do than to come up and cook for us till Mrs. Smith comes to our rescue."

He was joking, of course, but Jerry misunderstood, and answered with hot pride:—

"I'm afraid you'll have to put up with Larry Jukes' cooking, Mr. Forrest. We're awfully poor — I told you that — but we'll have to come a heap nearer starving than we have yet, before Don and I

let our sister slave for a lot of miners, to support us. You'll have to look farther than the Robin's Nest for a cook!"

"Don't misunderstand me!" replied Mr. Forrest, a little vexed, but more amused at Jerry's unnecessary flash of temper. "I hadn't the remotest intention of injuring your feelings. I was in fun — that was all. And yet," he went on seriously, "if I *had* been in earnest, it wouldn't have been in the slightest disrespect to your sister. Cooking for a mining camp boarding-house means hard work, of course, for boys who run drills and tend chuck and tram dirt all day are apt to have big appetites; but as far as respect is concerned, — why, there isn't a man at Twenty Rattles that wouldn't treat your sister like a princess, whether she was cooking his dinner or not. Some of them are rough fellows, drink and swear and gamble and all that, and it's an awful pity, of course; but I've yet to come across one that would say a coarse word, or do a discourteous thing before a woman who deserved his reverence. They haven't polished manners, but they're gentlemen at heart, and mighty good fellows, these California miners. They're honest as daylight, and brave! — why, Jerry, last winter two of our boys worked for three weeks in an upraise where there was danger any day, and they knew it, too, of breaking through into some abandoned workings and letting a thousand tons of water down on their heads. Of course the utmost care was used in engineering, and in the

end our surveys proved exactly right, so that we tapped the old works safely and drained away the water without accident. But there had been a big element of uncertainty about it all, and it had taken all sorts of nerve to keep steadily at work the way Barney and Mike did. Their wages were trebled, to be sure, on account of the danger, but a fellow doesn't risk his life just for a few dollars more or less."

"*What* for, then? They couldn't be made to do anything so dangerous."

"Certainly not. But the thing had to be done, and it seemed to be up to them to do it. As long as that body of water was unlocated above us, it was a menace. The only thing to do was to get rid of it, and when Mr. Abbott asked for volunteers, every unmarried man on the force offered to go in."

Jerry's imagination was stirred. This was the sort of thing his favorite heroes did.

"I remember now," he cried; "Larry Jukes told me something about that — and how one of the men went back into the tunnel after the water had begun to come through, to get a lantern or something that had been forgotten when they lit out for their lives! Was that Barney, or Mike? He said 'the kid,' if I remember."

The tanned cheek on which Jerry's gaze happened to be resting grew suddenly red in a boyish flush of embarrassment.

"No — that was one of the other fellows. And

that wasn't courage. It was pure foolhardiness, and 'the kid' ought to have been ashamed of himself. No man has a right to risk his life needlessly. He wouldn't have done it, I fancy, if there'd been any one in the world to whom it mattered much whether he lived or died. Now if he'd had a brother, Jerry, or a sister, or both, he would have been a coward to——"

"I remember perfectly *now*," interrupted Jerry, quietly, but with a saucy twinkle in his eye. "I remember just what Mr. Jukes said. He said it was 'that tom-fool kid engineer' that went back into the tunnel after the boss's lantern. Please don't bother to draw me any more morals, Mr. Forrest. I've got one idea out of your story. That's that you're an all 'round brick, and I'd like to shake hands with you again, if you don't mind."

In the hearty clasp that followed was sealed a friendship that had taken root suddenly, to be sure, but which was destined to last a life-time; to prove a strong influence toward manliness and responsibility in careless Jerry, and to add an element of warm elder-brotherly affection and interest to the rather lonely life of the young engineer.

They walked home together, climbing straight back up the western mountains by a trail Mr. Forrest knew, till they came out upon the road. This they followed down to the place where the Robin's Nest wagon track turned aside and crossed the bridge to the ranch.

Mr. Forrest declined Jerry's invitation to stop with him to supper, but promised to come over soon and call, and, with a cordial good night, the two separated, one to swing briskly out of sight up the road that led to Twenty Rattles, the other to fly across the bridge and up the path, and to burst upon Don and Robin and Maggie with a whoop of enthusiasm that startled them half out of their wits.

Out of breath, Jerry sank among the pillows of the hammock, and, between gasps, poured forth the tale of his adventures. The others listened with many interruptions and with flattering interest.

He began at the very beginning, rather shamefacedly confessing the nature of the quest on which he had left home that morning, and Robin squeezed his hand sympathetically when he told how Mr. Forrest had shattered the air castle into bits by his careless reference to "that old mica ledge."

His description of his new acquaintance as "the dandiest chap I ever met!" was promptly qualified in the minds of two of his three listeners by a mental reference to Jerry's known habit of exaggeration. Still, they had to admit that they liked the things he had said, and that it was good of him to offer to teach Jerry geology and mineralogy, so that he could go prospecting more intelligently and with better chance of success. Robin was naturally pleased at the stranger's praise of her cookery, and practical Don was won by the information that Mr. Forrest had promised to speak to Mr. Abbott about employ-

ing Jerry to make tri-weekly trips to Angel Flat for the camp mail.

"Do you think you can stand the long walk?" asked Robin, anxiously. "It will be at least ten miles, there and back."

"Stand it? Of course I can," sniffed Jerry.

"You can ride Stubby if you find it's too much for you," suggested Don. "Anyway, it's no use worrying about it till you get the job. Like as not Mr. Abbott won't see fit to hire you. Let's have supper, to change the subject. I'll dress your trout, Jerry, — you can rest."

And Jerry, feeling that he had done quite enough for one day toward bettering the family outlook, cuddled down among his pillows, and went peacefully to sleep, till he was recalled to consciousness by the delicious aroma of browning trout and Maggie's summons to "Wake up, and come to supper."

CHAPTER XII

WHAT ROBIN DID THEN

SYLVESTER ABBOTT, superintendent of the Twenty Rattles Mine, was sitting alone in his office, writing busily at the rough pine table that served him as a desk. The mail Jerry had brought over from Angel Flat the evening before lay scattered before him. His discarded coat hung on the back of his chair. His heavy iron-gray hair fairly bristled with pen-holders and pencils, for, as every one knew who knew the "boss" at all, it was his eccentric custom to thrust into his bushy locks anything of that sort that he wanted to get out of the way, and to-day every pen that he had taken out of his box had proved scratchier, and every pencil duller, than the last. The shaggy gray brows that shaded his deep-set, steady eyes were drawn together into something very like a frown. To one who did not know him for the kindest and most considerate of men, he surely would have given the impression, this May morning, of being first cousin to a grizzly bear.

Certainly his appearance was not reassuring to Robin Arnold, when, in response to a deep bass "Come in!" she opened the door at which she had tapped and stepped inside the uncarpeted little room.

After waiting a reasonable time for him to look up from his writing, Robin ventured to remark, rather timidly:—

"Good morning. I'm very sorry to disturb you, Mr. Abbott, but —— "

At the sound of her voice he started, glanced at her, got to his feet so precipitately that he nearly overturned his chair, and reached for his coat while he was exclaiming:—

"I beg a thousand pardons, Madam! I supposed of course it was Forrest coming in after his transit. Take a chair, please, and tell me how I can serve you."

Robin hastened to relieve the curiosity which she detected in his courteous tones.

"My name is Roberta Arnold. You know my brother Jerry. He has been carrying your mail for more than a week now. You find him trustworthy, I hope?"

"Oh, yes — yes, indeed! He's doing first rate, Jerry is. But you didn't come 'way over from your ranch just to relieve your mind on that score, Miss Arnold?"

The keen eyes that rested inquiringly on her face were at the same time so kind that Robin's desire to run away quite vanished, and she answered composedly, save for a little tremble in her voice:—

"I came to ask you, Mr. Abbott, if I might have the position of cook in your boarding-house until the woman you have engaged arrives. Mr. Forrest

told my brother that you needed some one for a month or two."

"Did Forrest suggest your applying for the place?" asked the superintendent, with a little frown.

"Only in fun. He was kind enough to be pleased with a luncheon my brother shared with him, and which Jerry told him I was responsible for. Jerry reported the conversation at home as a huge joke, and Don — that's my other brother — was as much amused at the idea as Jerry had been. In fact, I'm the only member of the family who treated the suggestion at all seriously. None of them dreamed that I was coming here when I started for my walk to-day."

"Suppose you tell me how *you* came to think seriously of it," proposed Mr. Abbott. "It's not difficult to see that, if I employ you, it will be a very unfamiliar position in which you find yourself."

Robin hesitated a minute, then answered with straightforward, girlish dignity:—

"I made up my mind to come, Mr. Abbott, because we're very poor, and getting poorer every day, in spite of the fact that we have tried not to spend a cent for anything but necessaries. Don is working beyond his strength, I am afraid, trying to make our ranch pay. The money Jerry earns carrying the mail for you is a wonderful help, but of course it doesn't go so very far.

"I am the oldest one at home, and we are orphans; I couldn't forgive myself if I let my foolish pride

and dread of drudgery keep me from doing anything honest and respectable to help along. At first I tried to persuade myself that I shouldn't be able to stand the work — but all the time I knew in my heart that I could. I am perfectly well and strong, though perhaps I look slight. And I believe I could satisfy you with my cooking. I was well taught at home, before my father died, and I've had lots of experience lately. At least, I should do my best if I were given the chance to try."

Robin stopped, rather out of breath with her long speech, and waited a reply. She grew more and more uncomfortable as Mr. Abbott continued to search her face kindly, but keenly. It seemed to her that those penetrating eyes were looking directly into her soul, and reading there her miserable, cowardly, shamefaced hope that he would say he did not want her — that she could never in the world make a success as cook for the Twenty Rattles boarding-house. Perhaps the superintendent *was* something of a mind reader. At any rate, he guessed without much difficulty that his refusal to give her the employment she sought would not prove an overwhelming blow. For a minute he was half tempted to shake his head, but it was the wiser second thought that dictated his reply. It would be kinder to sustain her in her courage than to humor her in her cowardice. And he could not honestly say that they did not need a cook.

"I shall be very glad to avail myself of your ser-

vices, Miss Arnold," he said at last, in a quiet, businesslike way that made it all seem very simple and natural. "I haven't any doubt of your being able to hold down the position, and the sooner you can take it, the better. This is Saturday — will Monday suit you? Very well, then, we'll call it settled. I'll send Larry over with the team for you and your trunk, Monday afternoon. Is there anything else to discuss? — oh, to be sure — wages! You will be paid thirty dollars a month, Miss Arnold, and, of course, your board."

Robin looked a little surprised.

"Jerry must have misunderstood Mr. Forrest, then. I'm sure he said Mr. Forrest told him you paid your cook six dollars a week. I had thought that pretty good."

Robin did not feel at all alarmed by the severe frown with which Mr. Abbott replied: —

"Jack is a very good boy, and I suppose I have spoiled him into thinking he runs the whole Twenty Rattles' outfit; but there are still one or two matters I decide without consulting him. Thirty a month I said, Miss Roberta, — let's consider that final."

As she got up to go, he rose also and opened the door for her. Then, quite to her surprise, he held out his hand.

"My dear little girl," he said, as his big, ink-stained fingers closed over her slender ones, "I want to tell you that I'm proud of you, and that if those brothers of yours don't appreciate you, they're

ungrateful young cubs. I've got a daughter of my own, pretty near your age, I should say, and you're doing just what I should want her to do under the same hard circumstances. I hope I shall never have to leave her to shift for herself, as your father had to leave you, but if I do——" He stopped short, and dropped Robin's hand to reach into his inner pocket. "Would you like to see my girl?" he asked, snapping open the case of a beautiful watch and laying it in Robin's hand. The face that looked up into hers from its encircling rim of gold was a wonderfully sweet and winsome one, with tenderness and mirth striving for the mastery in the curves of her pretty mouth and about the corners of her dark eyes.

"What a dear girl she is!" cried Robin, with genuine enthusiasm. "Doesn't she ever stay up here with you, Mr. Abbott? I should so love to know her!"

"She stayed with me two years after I came up to Twenty Rattles, but last fall I sent her to Europe with her aunt, to study music. She has talent, we think. That's her piano over in the corner."

"Then she will be away a long time?"

"Another year, at least. Some day, perhaps, you and she may be friends. I hope so, surely. Till Monday, then! Good morning, Miss Roberta!"

The door of the superintendent's office closed behind her, and Robin found herself once more in the glow of California sunshine, with the blue Cali-

fornia sky arching overhead. She stopped a moment on the steps and drew in a long breath of the pure and fragrant spring air, as she looked about her at the place which was to be her home for the next few weeks.

The superintendent's house was highest up the mountain-side of all the mine buildings, save a shaft-house, far above. Below where she stood, fifty or a hundred yards, stood the big, unpainted dormitory, or "sleeping house," and the boarding-house, which was known in the camp as the "Twenty Rattles Café." Smoke issuing from the chimney of this structure indicated that Larry Jukes within was "doing his worst" toward preparing the miners' midday meal. A long bench stood on the wide, unroofed porch in front of the eating-house, and several miners in dark woolen shirts, heavy overalls, and hobnailed boots, were sitting there, waiting for Larry's summons. Another strapping fellow, with a shock of sandy hair and the shoulders of a Hercules, was washing his face and hands in a tin basin by the pump, and drying them on a roller towel that hung against the door.

Below these buildings, deep down in the leafy ravine, Robin could see the roof of the blacksmith shop, the "change house" where the men washed themselves, and changed their clothing after work, and the gray-white of ore piles and waste dumps. Still farther down the slope, and across the road, stood the stamp mill and the air-compressing plant,

and below their big water-wheels the Mercedes was churned into white uproar. Above the unceasing din of pounding stamps that rose from the mill Robin could detect a merry "Cling — clang — cling — " from the blacksmith shop, where some one was sharpening drills.

"I believe I like it!" Robin told herself, as she tripped down the steep trail to the road. "It's as busy as an ant-hill, and it's dreadfully noisy, but it's all so clean and wholesome, with the blue sky overhead and the great evergreens looming up everywhere, right among the buildings. It's far nicer than some horrid, smoky city factory. I think I'd rather like to be a miner. But — oh, dearie me! — not a cook at a miners' boarding-house!" She shuddered a bit at the prospect as she passed the open windows of the "Café" and was greeted by an unsavory odor of burning pork. "Anyway," she meditated, with a little toss of her head, "if I've got to do it, I'll do it well, and if those shaggy bears of miners don't like my cooking better than Larry's, I'll write to Chrissie and tell her I'm a melancholy failure."

Now that the Rubicon was crossed, Robin's spirits began to rise. It would be hard work, of course, but forty or fifty dollars would be a great help when it came to laying in a stock of provisions for the winter. Robin found herself calculating how many cans of corn and pease, how many sides of bacon, how many sacks of floor, she could buy, if the con-

valescent Mr. Smith took five weeks, six weeks, seven weeks at the outside, let us say, to recover his health.

So busily engaged was she in this mental arithmetic, as she hurried home, that she was decidedly startled by a sudden, hoarse, asthmatic "Mee–ow?" at her feet.

"Why, Tom Quartz, you almost frightened me!" cried Robin, stooping down to stroke his head. She noticed then that she was just opposite a little shack which stood across the river among the trees, a huge fallen log being apparently the only means of approach to it from her side of the stream. She had passed by without noting it on her way to the mine.

"I'm all of a mind to take a peep at your master's house, Tom," she smiled. "He isn't home, I know, but I'm sure he won't object if I just look in at the window."

She tiptoed carefully across the log, with Tom close behind her, and found herself in a very pleasant little place. The narrow opening among the trees, through which she had caught sight of Larry's cabin, widened here into a circular clearing large enough for the tiny house, a scrap of a garden where pansies and beets hobnobbed cheerfully, a beehive or two, a half-dozen little chicken-coops and a fair-sized hen-house. All round the little clearing Larry had built a rough but substantial wall of stones, as a bulwark against the depreda-

tions of hungry cattle. Only one tree was left inside the wall, a beautiful spreading oak that shaded the cabin from the heat of the midday sun. The cabin itself was built of logs and was half covered with a tangle of hop vines, that tried besides to cover with a green mantle of charity the inevitable pile of empty tin cans that disfigured Larry's dooryard.

The door of Larry's dwelling stood hospitably open, and Robin, after a moment's hesitation,walked in. Tom Quartz, evidently much pleased at the unexpected honor of this visit, rubbed against her skirt, purring huskily.

To a neat housekeeper like Robin, the interior of Larry's shack presented a frightful example of masculine disorderliness.

"This is exactly how a room would look that Don and Jerry had kept house in, without me to pick up after them," she told Tom Quartz, adding with a sudden inspiration: "Let's fix it up, Tom, and give your master a surprise!"

Tom signified his approval of the plan by purring louder and more wheezily than ever, as Robin pinned up her skirt, rolled her sleeves back to her elbows, and set to work with a broom and dust-pan she had found in an out-of-the-way corner of the woodshed.

Larry's one room was small, and its furnishings few, and Robin's nimble hands made short work of dirt and disorder. In an hour the place presented

quite another appearance. The floor was spotless and still damp from an energetic use of broom and mop. The bottles and cans and dishes on the open cupboard shelves were dusted and put in order. The blankets on the bunk in the corner were neatly folded, and the pillow thumped into shape. A bowl of pink azalea blossoms on the table filled the room with fragrance, and the afternoon sunshine streamed warmly in through the freshly polished panes of a window which Larry, in the many years of his residence here, had never thought to wash.

Well satisfied with her labors, Robin took a final proud look about the room.

"I suppose I ought to leave my card," she remarked to Tom, who, inspired by the general atmosphere of cleanliness, had retired to the tidily brushed hearth to wash his face. "But I seem to have forgotten my card-case, and anyway, it will be more fun to leave him guessing. Don't you dare to tell him who's been here, you bad old pussy-cat!"

With this farewell warning she left the cabin, shutting the door behind her, lest the cat should try to follow her home in his doglike way. Recrossing the log to the other side of the stream, she turned to the right and followed the pleasant windings of the road in the direction of the Robin's Nest.

The May afternoon was so full of loveliness that Robin could not be unhappy, in spite of her vague dread of the weeks to come, and her very uncomfortable apprehension of the wrath of two horrified

brothers when she should tell her news. She dismissed all anxious thought from her mind as she loitered along the road under the sun-flecked shade of the trees, breathing the warm, aromatic odor of the blossoming tar-weed that carpeted the hillsides with dull green, and filling her hands with the wild flowers whose endless variety and profusion were to her an unfailing source of delight.

The mariposa lilies, loveliest of Sierran wild flowers, were blossoming now, in all the shades of cream and lavender and rose. John Forrest had told her that "*mariposa*" was the Spanish word for butterfly, and she thought of it to-day, telling herself that no fitter name could have been given to the flower whose waxen petals, in shape and marking, bore so exquisite a resemblance to the fragile beauty of a butterfly's wing.

Here and there on the hillside a flushing of color in the green stretches of tar-weed revealed Robin's favorite among all the May blossoms — the wild phlox, pink as a wild rose and delicately fragrant. Tar-weed is disagreeable stuff to venture into, for the sticky gum its fernlike leaves secrete, clings obstinately to one's garments; but Robin could never resist the alluring beauty of the phlox and the mariposas, and used always to come home from her rambles with her skirts pleasantly odorous and unpleasantly smeared from this "mountain misery" through which she had waded.

The squirrels were very much in evidence to-day,

playing tag with one another up and down the trees, and trailing their long gray tails in the dust as they scampered along the road ahead of her. A jack-rabbit darted into the chaparral as she passed, and some unknown bird sang rapturously, keeping ever a little way ahead of her and out of sight. So quiet were the woods that the bird's song rang out clear and alone in the peaceful hush.

Here was no babel of robin and wren, oriole and song-sparrow and bobolink, such as was making merry the groves and orchards and meadows of her childhood's home. Sometimes Robin grew wildly homesick for it all. Sometimes she felt that this beautiful, strange land, with its unfamiliar birds and flowers and people, could never come to be truly home to her as Summerville had been. But at such times the cheery, hopeful nature that made her nickname seem, to all who knew her, so appropriate a one, would come to the rescue.

"I want to love it here — I *do* love it!" she would tell herself vehemently. "Home is where the heart is, and where could my heart be, except here, where Don and Jerry and Maggie are?" And then she would go singing about her work so blithely and sweetly that no one would have dreamed that the least thought of discontent had entered her heart. That was Robin all over—the dear, brave, sunny Robin of our tale.

Home at last, Robin crossed the threshold of the Robin's Nest with a bold exterior, but with an inward

"JOHN FOREST, WITH HIS TRIPOD ON HIS SHOULDER, STOOD WAITING TO SPEAK TO HER."

shakiness, the result of what might be termed an innocently guilty conscience.

"Here she is!" cried Maggie.

"Where in the world have you been?" scolded Don. "We were just getting ready to drag the brook."

"And we haven't had a bite to eat since morning —not one blessed bite!" mourned Jerry, in his most abused accents. "Maggie locked the cupboard and sat on the key so we couldn't have dinner till you got here!"

"I never did!" protested Maggie, who could not always remember that no one ever took Jerry's remarks too literally.

But Don had been studying his sister's face.

"Roberta Arnold, you've been doing something you're ashamed of. You may as well out with it at once!"

"Don't scold me, boys—please don't!" she implored, between laughter and tears.

Don came over to her side, put his arm around her, and looked down at her protectingly.

"If you're truly sorry and promise never to do it again, I'll not let Jerry say a word. But I reserve the right to scold you myself if I think you deserve it. 'Fess up, Sis! What is it you've been and gone and done?"

"I haven't been and gone and done anything yet," she protested faintly. "It's something I'm going to do." Then, more faintly still, "I'm going to

Twenty Rattles to — to — cook for the boarding-house!"

And then she hid her face in Don's shoulder, to avoid the tempest of disapproval and protest that she knew was sure to follow.

CHAPTER XIII

AT TWENTY RATTLES

WITH cheeks the color of the wild phlox from bending over a red-hot stove, with the dimple on her chin coquettishly pretending to hide behind a dab of flour, and with riotous wisps of soft brown hair emancipating themselves from the bondage of comb and pin, Roberta Arnold paused in the doorway between the dining-room and kitchen of the Twenty Rattles boarding-house, surveyed the set table and concluded that she was ready to "dish up" her supper.

Flying into the tiny cubby-hole off the kitchen, which was to be her sanctuary these coming weeks, she made herself tidy, tried in vain to cool her blazing cheeks with cold water, and changed her gingham apron for a dainty white one with ruffles over the shoulders.

"Oh, dear, I look for all the world like a maid in parlor theatricals!" she sighed in distress, as she took a peep at herself in the cracked mirror that hung against the wall. "I do wish I'd had time to make some plain white aprons; but it's too late now, and I just can't wait on table in an old checked gingham one!"

With a final disapproving frown at her pretty reflection, she hurried through the kitchen and dining room to the porch, took down a great horn from its nail by the bench, put it to her lips, and blew—blew till her cheeks tingled. A melancholy little squawk was the only resulting sound. Much chagrined, she took a deep breath and tried again, with only slightly better results.

"What *shall* I do?" thought Robin, in despair. "I simply haven't the audacity to go up to the office and ask Mr. Abbott to come down and blow the horn for me. I shall just have to wait till the men get hungry enough to come of their own accord."

Before giving up, however, Robin made a last tremendous effort, and this time succeeded in evoking from the instrument a feeble, wailing toot that carried as far as the sleeping house, and reached one pair of human ears.

"I've raised somebody, at last," she meditated in grim triumph, as she watched a tall, brawny figure strolling toward her from the dormitory. "I may as well wait till he gets here and send him around to gather in the rest. Oh dear, how simply horrid it is! I never dreamed I'd feel so embarrassed!"

The bright color in her cheeks deepened a shade or two in spite of, possibly because of, her desperate effort to appear composed as the stalwart miner came up the steps. He wore no hat, and she recognized him by his shock of tawny hair as the man who

had been washing his face at the pump on the occasion of her first visit to the mine.

"Good avenin'. Annything Oi kin do fer yez, Miss?" he asked politely, but with an amused twinkle in the corner of his merry blue eye, and a sidelong glance at the horn in Robin's hand.

"Yes, thank you," she replied frankly. "I'd be a thousand times obliged if you'd call the men to dinner. I suppose I'm very stupid, but I can't seem to manage this horn."

He reached out a huge, hairy paw, and took the horn from her unresisting grasp.

Now horn-blowing by Barney O'Hara of the Twenty Rattles Mine was a somewhat different matter from horn-blowing by Robin Arnold of Summerville, New England. Such a series of booming bellows began to issue from the battered old instrument that Robin fled to the kitchen with her hands over her ears, devoutly hoping that Mr. Abbott and the chief engineer were not holding *her* responsible for the racket that was bursting in at their office windows.

"I'm sure that'll do!" she protested, reappearing at the door. "Thank you so much!"

"Oi'll be plazed to blow the bloomin' thing fer yez iviry mornin', noon, an' night, if ye loike," he remarked, as he hung the horn on its nail. "Ye kin depind on me. Barney O'Hara's niver far away whin it's male-toime!"

"It will be a great accommodation if you will,"

said Robin, in grateful relief. "You're very kind, Mr. O'Hara." And she hurried indoors to put her dinner on the table before the men, now approaching from smithy, change house and dormitory, should reach the "café."

"'Mr. O'Hara!' She called yez 'Mr. O'Hara!' Did ye hear her, ye rid-hidded Oirish galoot?" Barney murmured, looking after her with respect and admiration. Then he turned to greet his fellow-miners with the announcement that the new cook was a beautiful lady with iligant manners, and they'd better wash their black faces if they hadn't alriddy, and remimber to keep their ilbows off the table.

The ordeal of her first meal at Twenty Rattles proved a far less fiery one than Robin had anticipated. Perhaps the obvious shyness of the men she was serving did something to relieve her own embarrassment, and it cannot be denied that the way they devoured her warm biscuits, her ham and eggs and baked "Bayo" beans, her dried-apple pie and strong black coffee, was very reassuring.

"Though, maybe, it's just that Larry's starved them to it!" she reflected modestly, as she heaped a huge ironstone plate for the third time from her biscuit tins. But after the meal was over and the men had stacked their dishes, pushed back their chairs, and gone, she had her reward. The superintendent, who had sat at the head of the table with his men, came into the kitchen and paused by the sink, where Robin was scouring steel knives and

forks, and trying not to think too much about the Robin's Nest.

"Keep on the way you've begun, Miss Roberta, and we'll be more than satisfied," he said kindly. "But don't work yourself to death. I'll tell Larry to run in and help you, occasionally. He's sampling ore dumps for our assayer, but he can easily be spared for an hour or two every morning."

But Robin protested. "Please don't send him, Mr. Abbott. I shall get along with the work quite comfortably, I am sure. I'd rather do it alone — truly I would!"

"Don't want the old boy puttering around your kitchen — is that it?" he asked.

"Partly, perhaps." Robin looked a little confused. "I'm afraid I'm a trifle fussy about things. The boys say I am. And Mr. Jukes isn't — well, he isn't fastidiously neat about his housekeeping arrangements." A vision of the interior of Larry's shack as it had been before her missionary visit flashed into her mind, and she smiled reminiscently. "And, moreover," she went on, "I don't want to feel that I am doing less than your cooks usually do. You are paying me large wages, and if I find I can't earn the money by my unaided efforts, I'd rather give up and go home."

Mr. Abbott liked the firm little set of the lips with which Robin ended her sentence.

"Very well, then, I'll not take Larry from his sampling, since you don't want him. But don't kill

yourself. Let things go a little. Some way I seem to feel responsible for you." And with that the superintendent left the kitchen.

In spite of her declaration of independence, Robin found, in the days that followed, that her hard work was being lightened by many little acts of consideration, which, in her heart of hearts, she was afraid had not been performed for the strapping German fraülein who had been her predecessor at the Twenty Rattles Café.

Barney O'Hara, true to his word, constituted himself her Knight of the Dinner-horn, and thrice daily the peaceful hills resounded to his stentorian blasts.

Larry kept her kindling box filled with the choicest of pitch-pine chips, and her supply of fine seasoned stove wood was never allowed to run short.

Little Mike Fleharty, not to be outdone by his tall compatriot, used to creep over from the dormitory before daylight, and scrub the tracks of muddy boots from her porch by the light of his lantern, a curious home-made contrivance, composed of a tomato can with one end gone, a bale of wire, and a candle.

Bino Silveroli, brother of the friendly Cæsar of a preceding chapter, never went down with the morning shift into tunnel or shaft, without first appearing at the kitchen door with a bashful grin on his face, seizing the big tin pail from its shelf, and hurrying off with it as if it were stolen property, and the sheriff of the county were after him. And if, by any chance, the same pail became empty before noon,

and Robin started up the trail to refill it at the spring that gushed from the rocks above the superintendent's office, she was more than likely to be hailed as she passed the open door of the office.

"Hold on, Miss Robin — let me do that for you!" a voice would call, and in a minute more the pail would be taken from her hand, her protesting, "You don't need to, Mr. Forrest — it won't be at all heavy!" quite disregarded.

"They all spoil me. I couldn't ask to be treated more kindly or respectfully than I have been," she told Don, at the end of her first week at the mine. She had been too busy to go to the Robin's Nest at all, but one or the other of the boys had run over every day or two to see how she was getting along, and to try by scolding or coaxing to persuade her to give it up and come home.

"I'm perfectly well, and perfectly satisfied. Don't try any more to discourage me, Don! I'm doing what I think is right, and you and Jerry are only making it hard for me."

"Are we really?" Don's voice was full of compunction. "We ought to be thrashed if that's the case. I'll not say another word, Robin, about its being too hard for you, and I'll choke off Jerry's everlasting nonsense about the injury to his family pride. Only promise me, dear" — he threw his arm over her shoulders in the protecting way that always made Robin feel like a little girl —"promise me you'll give it up the minute you feel that you're getting tired!"

Robin laughed. "I'll promise to stop when I think it's injuring my health, but as to stopping as soon as I get tired — why, I'd have stopped long ago. I'm tired as I can be every night. I don't pretend it's easy work, Don; but it isn't hurting me, and it won't be for so very long. And since you boys and Maggie are getting along so well without me ——"

"Not *well* at all! Just endurably."

"Endurably, then. And as long as I'm not suffering from overwork, there is nothing to worry about, and a great deal to be thankful for. Just be good children, and don't fret. And come to see me as often as you can. It does get pretty lonesome at times."

Don kissed his sister good-by and left her, turning round when he reached the place where the trail met the road, to wave his hand in answer to the white flicker of her handkerchief. His heart swelled with affection and boyish pride at the pretty picture she made as she stood there above him, the afternoon sunlight turning her wavy brown hair to gold; her face a little paler than its wont, but bright and smiling as she nodded after him and called good-by; her graceful figure in its simple blue cotton gown looking wonderfully slight and girlish, outlined against the bole of a huge cedar that grew by the porch of the boarding-house.

So she stood and watched him with loving eyes, and the smile did not fade from her face until he was out of sight around the curve of the hill road,

hurrying back to the home that, as Robin was glad and sad to know, wasn't home at all since she had come away from it.

Don's eyes were not the only ones that saw that picture — the slim girl in the faded blue gown, standing bareheaded in the sunshine, with the green background of Sierran forest behind her, looking down with smiling lips and wistful eyes into the leafy ravine below. John Forrest, tramping up the trail to the office with his tripod on his shoulder, stopped short in the gay strain he was whistling as he came opposite the boarding-house, and, lifting his gray sombrero, stood waiting to speak to her when she should look round.

All unconscious of his presence, Robin stood there, still gazing at the place where her brother had disappeared. The smile died away from her face as Forrest watched her. Presently, with a little sigh, she lifted her eyes from the ravine into whose depths she had been looking, and fixed them dreamily, unseeingly, on the green heights of the mountains that rose before her — the rugged, pine-clad barrier that lay between this new life and the old, between the West of her realities and the East of her memories and dreams. There were home-sickness and longing, as well as courage and sweetness, in the girl's face as she stood in the sunshine, statue-still, forgetful for a little space of everything about her. So young, so alone, so out of place among these rude surroundings did she seem, that a sudden

ache of chivalrous pity went through the heart of the young man. Without disturbing her, he went on up the trail and into the house he shared with the superintendent. It was the slam with which the door of the office closed after him that recalled Robin from her reverie and sent her indoors in a hurry to pare potatoes for the evening meal.

That night, when the engineer stopped after supper to say good evening to her, she wondered a little why his manner was even more than usually kind and courteous. She would have been amused and touched had she known that he was wishing with all his heart that Jerry's wild idea of adopting him as an elder brother to the entire Robin's Nest household were a more practicable one. Here was he, with only himself to take care of, earning a salary that far more than sufficed for his modest needs. And here, on the other hand, was this brave little woman wearing herself out with hard and uncongenial drudgery; here was sixteen-year-old Don getting old long before his time trying to carry a burden of responsibility that would have been light to more mature and experienced shoulders; and here were Jerry and Maggie, growing up in the woods, with no prospect of their ever receiving any of the educational advantages they ought to have, and sadly needed.

"If only a fellow could do something for them," he wrote, in the shabby, Russia-bound journal that served him as a confidant. "If only things

could be evened up a little. But of course they'd die before they'd take help from a mere acquaintance like me, and I shouldn't even dare offer, for fear of hurting their pride. It's a beastly situation, and there's no way out of it that I see."

And even as he wrote, Fate was at work preparing a way. For yet another pair of eyes had that afternoon been watching Robin, unseen themselves, as she stood in the mellow glow of sunshine on the porch of the Twenty Rattles eating-house.

All that night Larry Jukes sat by the cold hearthstone in his little cabin, lost in bitter thought, his heavy black brows knit sternly, his eyes full of fierce sadness. Once Tom Quartz jumped to his knee, but Larry pushed him off, to Tom's chagrin and wrath.

"Y'u can't help me to-night, old feller. Nobody can't. I've got this here thing to think out alone," Larry explained apologetically.

The cold gray of dawn began to steal through the little window Robin had washed, before the old man got up, blew out his candle, walked stiffly across the room, and lay down on the bunk; but not yet had he thought the thing out.

"I can't — I can't make up my mind to!" he moaned weakly, pulling the gray blankets up over his shivering shoulders. Then, suddenly, he cried aloud in a harsh, rasping voice, that startled Tom Quartz wide awake:—

"Curse him! Curse John Sturtevandt!"

CHAPTER XIV

JERRY, THE IRRESPONSIBLE

"WHOOP-LA!"

The exclamation was loud and sudden, and the voice that exclaimed was within a few feet of Robin's ear, but she did not start. She was too used to Jerry for that, and moreover she had been watching for him for an hour past.

"Here you are at last!" she said, looking around brightly from her after-supper dish-washing. "Aren't you later than usual, Jerry?"

"It's Mr. Abbott's fault if I am. I went over to the office to get his letters, and he kept me there half an hour, lecturing me about carelessness."

"What have you been doing that was careless?" asked his sister, reproachfully.

"Nary a thing! He's afraid I'm going to do something, that's all. He says he's expecting some mail by to-night's stage that's awfully important — deeds or papers of some sort that he wouldn't have lost for a thousand dollars. I'm to sign the registry receipt with his name."

Jerry unconsciously swelled with importance, but Robin looked anxious.

"Do be very careful, dear," she urged. "I know

you always mean to be, but sometimes you're a little — a little —— "

Jerry threw his arms about her in a bearlike hug, and stopped the accusation with a sounding kiss. Before she had recovered her breath to conclude her warning, he was gone.

The Minersville stage did not reach the mountain village of Angel Flat till evening, so that Jerry's tri-weekly trips for the mail were always made after dark. Robin never felt easy on the nights when he was away. His tramp through the woods was indeed a lonely one. No single ranch or prospector's shanty broke the monotony of the miles of forest. Much of the distance was covered by way of steep and rugged trails, and the road itself was a mere wagon track, winding among the great trees. Except on moonlit nights, there was never any light to guide him save the twinkle of his own lantern through the open, park-like stretches under the trees, or a cold glimmer of the stars above the feathery pine and spruce tops.

Robin's imagination, always vivid, busied itself on these occasions by investing every low bough under which her brother was passing with a hungry wild cat or mountain lion; and until he burst in upon her at the boarding-house on his way home, she was invariably picturing him as lying with a sprained ankle or a broken leg, somewhere out in the vast expanse of loneliness between her and Angel Flat. To-night she felt rather more than usually anxious,

for the knowledge that Jerry was to be trusted with papers of such importance made her usual forebodings take on a new form — that of robbery and foul play. Weren't such things always to be looked for in a wild country like this, she should like to know?

Meanwhile Jerry, unconscious of his sister's absurd fears, was swinging briskly on by the now familiar trail and road toward Angel. No thought of danger entered his head as he trudged onward, gayly whistling.

The stage, with its four raw-boned, sure-footed horses, drew up in front of the tiny post-office just as Jerry turned the corner, and Sandy McDowell threw out a mail-bag to the postmaster, who was waiting to receive it. A score or more of people were waiting about to see the mail distributed—rough, broad-shouldered men, barefooted children, and a half-dozen young girls, whispering and giggling together.

As usual, a generous share of the contents of Sandy's bag was turned over to Jerry. Among the letters for Twenty Rattles was one in a long, yellow envelope, with a registry stamp in the corner — evidently the important missive, as to the care of which he had received such particular injunctions.

"You'll have to sign for this one," the postmaster remarked, pushing an open register toward Jerry, and indicating the place where he was to write. "Mr. Abbott's name here, please, and 'per' your

own below. That's right. And on this card, too. Thanks."

Jerry's idea of his own importance, already comfortably high, rose several degrees as the young ladies stopped laughing and talking to stare at the representative of the Twenty Rattles Mine, while the small boys stood on tiptoe to see what he was doing. He was used to being stared at thus three times a week, being a stranger, and rather a strikingly good-looking lad; and, I am ashamed to confess, he thoroughly enjoyed the experience.

After signing his name with an extra flourish and a well-assumed air of entire unconsciousness of the interest he was exciting, Jerry thrust his letters into the gunny-sack he always carried, threw the latter over his shoulder, bade the postmaster's wife good night with his usual sunny courtesy, and turned to go.

But before he reached the door, it opened suddenly, and he found himself face to face with Larry Jukes.

Now there had been something very peculiar of late about Larry Jukes and his manner toward the Arnolds. His usual talkativeness and neighborly cordiality had quite disappeared, and he had become uncommunicative to the point of surliness. He had not been at the Robin's Nest for weeks — not once, indeed, since Robin had come to Twenty Rattles more than a month before. Even to Robin herself, unmistakably his favorite among his new neighbors, he had changed. All that he could do to

lighten her hard tasks, he still did. In fact, he seemed to her to be in a constant state of feverish anxiety to perform some service for her. In the face of her continued friendliness, however, he remained silent and grim. To her conversational advances he replied in monosyllables only, and he avoided her society so obviously that, puzzled and hurt, she had come to the regretful conclusion that the only thing to do was to let him alone and trust time to unravel the mystery of his eccentric behavior.

Jerry had grown so used to this unaccountable attitude of Larry's, that he was more than a little surprised to-night, when, in response to his own simple, "Good evening, Mr. Jukes," Larry had replied with noticeable effusion. A new change had come over the old man. His voice was loud; his cheeks were flushed; his blue eyes shone with reckless excitement.

Jerry felt that something was wrong, but he was far from guessing the truth — that poor old Larry had been for hours in one of the many saloons of Angel, trying in vain to drown out of his half mad brain the memory of a problem that had haunted his days and tormented his nights for several weeks past. It was years since Larry had touched drink. The lookers-on in the post-office this June evening regarded him with surprise and curiosity.

"Something must have happened to unsettle the old fellow. He's certainly had a drop too much," the postmaster remarked aside to his wife.

Jerry, for his part, was trying to excuse himself and get away, for he knew that it was growing late, and that both Robin and Mr. Abbott would be waiting his return. But Larry would not let him pass.

"Not a step back to Twenty Rattles do y'u go yet awhile, lad!" he vociferated. "I'll be goin' myself in half an hour, an' we'll go together. Come along with me, boy! They've got a contrivance over to Peters' store that I'll bet Tom Quartz' whiskers y'u ain't never seen the like on, East nor West!"

"What is it called?" asked Jerry, with mild curiosity.

"I don't rightly remember its name. 'Gran'ma Fone' or some such nonsense he called it. But it's big as the dinner-horn at Twenty Rattles, an' it can talk as well as I can, an' sing a heap better. Peters he got it down to Sacramento last week. He's lettin' people see it for ten cents a head."

It chanced that no one in the post-office had heard before of the advent into Angel Flat of Mr. Peters' gramophone.

"Y'u didn't say it kin talk, did y'u?" asked an awe-inspired little boy, in breathless tones.

"Shucks! Let's us go over and see for ourselves!" suggested some one else.

"Come on! come on! all of y'u. Don't say no, unless y'u want trouble! It's my treat!" roared Larry, in a sudden burst of generosity.

It would have been absurd to decline such an

invitation, and no one thought of so doing. Men and women, girls and boys, trooped across the street in Larry's wake and crowded into the dimly lighted interior of Peters' store. Larry threw several silver half dollars on the counter, and indicated to the proprietor with a comprehensive wave of his arm that he was acting as host for the party.

"Walk right in, ladies and gentlemen," cried Mr. Peters. "Walk right in and take a look at the greatest product of modern inventive genius. That's what the circ'lar calls it, and I guess it ain't far from right. Step this way, Mr. Jukes and all — right this way!"

Larry followed him, and the crowd followed Larry into Mrs. Peters' cosy sitting-room back of the store, where they gathered around the table on which reposed the scientific wonder of the age.

"Now, what shall we listen to first?" asked Mr. Peters, genially. "A speech by that eminent statesman, our representative in congress from this district? A funny song? An orchestry selection? We'll let the ladies decide, won't we, gents? Miss Tillie Switzer, which shall it be? Speak up — don't be bashful."

Miss Tillie giggled consciously, and, after some deliberation, chose the funny song.

After this had been rendered, to the delight of the audience, Larry demanded the speech. This proved to be an unfortunate choice, for more than half the men present were politically at variance

with their congressman, and his rather intemperate remarks on certain matters still at issue provoked such indignant interruptions and hot arguments that the eloquent voice of the gramophone was in imminent danger of being drowned out. Mr. Peters averted such a catastrophe by nipping short the peroration of the Gentleman from California, and substituting a lively march by a blaring brass band.

All this was, of course, very amusing to a superior young man who had lived in New York, and to whom gramophones were an old story. Jerry knew that he ought not to linger, but it was hard to tear himself away from the first scene of anything approaching social festivity at which he had been present for months. And what possible harm could there be in staying just a few minutes longer?

The few minutes waxed into an hour, for Mr. Peters' instrument had a large repertoire, and neither his patience nor the interest of his audience showed any signs of flagging. A striking clock suddenly reminded Jerry that he must stay no longer, and he turned to pick up his belongings and go. If Larry wasn't ready yet, he couldn't wait another minute for him.

Just as he was reaching for the gunny-sack he had carefully deposited on a chair, Jerry heard some one behind him ask in an audible whisper:—

"Who is he, anyhow?"

"The young swell, you mean?" rejoined an even

louder whisper. "He hails from Twenty Rattles — sort of chores around over there, I understand."

Jerry's head went up a little, and turning squarely upon the whisperers, he announced clearly and loudly enough for every one to hear:—

"My name is Gerald Sturtevandt Arnold, since you're so interested in my affairs. I came here from New York, and I'm acting as private mail carrier for Superintendent Abbott of the Twenty Rattles Mine."

The words were no sooner spoken than Jerry realized how rude and silly and pompous they sounded, and how uncalled for they had been. He began to blush furiously with anger and embarrassment as he took in the glances that were being exchanged around the room. If any one had looked indignant or offended by his manner, he would have minded less, but they all appeared so insultingly, so justifiably, amused.

Larry Jukes took this inopportune time to make a serious blunder.

"Wall, now," he drawled, "I reckon the fault's all mine. I ought to've introduced y'u to my young friend long since. Allow me, ladies an' gents all! This here is Mr. Jerry Arnold, nephew of a man y'u all used to know — o' that mean, sneakin', ungrateful hound of a Johnnie Sturtevandt!"

That was the last straw. Larry and Jerry had always been more or less like flint and steel, even during the period of pleasantest relations between

the Arnold household and their old neighbor; but never before had Larry been so maddening or Jerry so furious. Still, Larry was obviously not himself to-night — there was that excuse for him. And he was an old man. Deeply rooted in the hearts of all Dr. Arnold's children, even in that of hot-tempered Jerry, was a principle their father had planted there — respect for old age. With all the resolution he possessed, Jerry choked back the angry words that surged to his lips.

"You're old enough to be my grandfather, Mr. Jukes," he said at last, "and so I can't say what I — what I couldn't help saying if you were young. But I guess you won't expect me to wait and walk home with you, now. I'm afraid you'd find me poor company. So I'll say good night to you here.

"I'm awfully sorry to have made a scene," he added apologetically to Mrs. Peters.

"Don't think another thing about it, Sonny," exclaimed motherly Mrs. Peters. "We all know Larry Jukes' ways, and don't pay any more attention to them than nothin'."

"'Twan't your fault!" declared Miss Tillie Switzer, indignantly, while the postmaster's pretty wife patted him soothingly on a shoulder that squirmed, but was too polite to shake off her sympathetic hand. Jerry did wish people wouldn't cuddle him like a little boy. They never did Don, and Don was only a year older.

It was noticeable that the men present made no

comments. Perhaps they were thinking that Jerry had been served right for his high-mightiness, and I'm not sure he hadn't.

With a fiercely civil good night to the company, poor Jerry, fearful of breaking down and crying babyishly from sheer wrath, seized his cap and lantern and bolted from the room, stalked the length of the deserted store, and, to his infinite relief, found himself alone in the cool, fresh darkness.

He stopped a minute to listen, but the burst of mocking laughter he resentfully awaited did not come. Instead, there floated out from an open window a high, shrill, soprano voice. "Oh, promise me — Oh, promise me!" it entreated with a metallic buzz, and in such an agony of entreaty that it would have seemed advisable to promise her anything she wanted, and as speedily as possible. Evidently he and his humiliation were already mercifully forgotten, and the gramophone was once more the center of interest in Mrs. Peters' sitting-room.

With a sigh of thankfulness Jerry set his face homeward. The night was darker than usual, for a fleecy drift of rainless clouds hid the stars, but the glimmer of his little lantern enabled him to keep to his way, and, with his brain still turbulent from the unpleasant experience of the evening, he pressed steadily on through the woodland, until he had covered nearly half the distance to the mine.

Then, suddenly, as if he had been shot, Jerry

stopped short, with an exclamation of horror. It was not a wildcat or a grizzly bear; it was not even a highwayman; it was something infinitely worse. He had just realized that in the excitement of his hurried departure from Angel Flat he had left his gunny-sack with all the mine mail, and, worst of all, with that precious registered letter, inside, lying on a chair in the corner of Mrs. Peters' sitting-room.

How could he — *how could he* have done such an inexcusable thing?

But before he had had time to decide that difficult problem, the climax of the tragedy arrived. Another lantern came swinging briskly toward him around a curve in the trail, and out of the darkness above it the relieved voice of the superintendent of Twenty Rattles called cheerfully:—

"That you, Jerry? What was wrong — stage late? And my letter — did it come?"

CHAPTER XV

THE FALL OF THE STURTEVANDT PRIDE

JERRY was Jerry — there was no gainsaying that. It was to be doubted whether any amount of bitter experience would make him as sensible as Robin or as responsible as Don. But whatever virtues he lacked, he possessed two very important ones. He was neither cowardly nor dishonest. There was only one square thing to do, and he never thought of doing anything else. Miserably conscious of the stern, disappointed eyes upon him, he confessed the whole story, not even trying to excuse himself.

"I'm no end ashamed of myself. I'll run every step of the way back," he concluded, eager to be off.

"That will be quite unnecessary," the superintendent replied, in such cold, quiet tones that poor Jerry's heart sank like lead. "I consider it safer to go on to Angel myself. You had better hasten home and relieve your sister's anxiety. You might have considered her, even if you hadn't enough sense of honor to —— "

But Jerry couldn't stand that.

"Please don't say what I did was dishonorable! I know I was horribly careless, and I ought to have remembered what you said about coming directly

back, but carelessness isn't the same as dishonesty. I'd die before I'd steal, or read a letter that didn't belong to me, or — or anything like that."

"I don't doubt it. You are too proud, I imagine, to do the mean, contemptible things that 'no gentleman would do.' I suppose it has never occurred to you that to accept a trust and prove unfaithful to it is practically as dishonest as stealing. There are times when a lack of a sense of responsibility amounts to a lack of a sense of honor. I'm sorry to be harsh, Jerry, but I *am* disappointed in you."

Speechless with shame and misery, Jerry watched the twinkle of the superintendent's lantern go bobbing away along the trail toward Angel Flat, disappearing and reappearing like a firefly through the woods. Not till he had watched it quite out of sight did he awake to the realization that his own lantern had taken advantage of the presence of Mr. Abbott's to go out, leaving him now in utter darkness. Filled and lighted just before he left the Robin's Nest, it would ordinarily have lasted till midnight, but the wick was short, and he had forgotten to replace it. Another example of his inexcusable carelessness!

Involved in this unhappy web of his own weaving, Jerry became desperate.

"I don't care!" he sputtered. "I'll go on in the dark, and if I fall over the bluff at the Blue Gorge and break my good-for-nothing head, I don't much mind!"

Then, quick as a flash, the words he had just listened to came back to him: "*There are times when a lack of a sense of responsibility amounts to a lack of a sense of honor!*"

How would it make Don and Robin feel if anything should happen to their beloved scapegrace? How sorry Maggie would be if her chum should break his neck! Even if he *were* tired of life on his own account, he supposed he ought to consider the feelings of his family. That it would be reckless for him to try to cover in the dark the two miles of rough trail that lay between him and Twenty Rattles, he well knew. There was one place where the path ran close to the edge of a steep bluff. There was another where the trail wound among the deep prospect cuts and open trial shafts of a long abandoned mine. There were steep descents, where a single false step might send him rolling down — down — down, with an avalanche of loose stones, into the valley of the Mercedes. If he could get on the wagon road again, from which the trail had branched a mile back, he could follow that to the mine safely, but it was several miles farther that way, and Mr. Abbott would be sure to reach Twenty Rattles ahead of him, in which case Robin would be distracted, indeed.

With a sigh of resignation to a malignant fate, Jerry sat down on the fragrant carpet of pine needles, and awaited the return of the superintendent. Not that he anticipated with any pleasure walking home

with that gentleman. He could think of nothing more out of keeping with his desires under existing circumstances. But it would be irresponsible and consequently dishonorable to plunge on into the darkness at imminent risk to life and limb, and Jerry was never going to be irresponsible again. He was done with such childish failings. He had turned over a new leaf.

Please do not laugh at Jerry! Of course he will be irresponsible many a time again, and the new leaf is sadly liable to be blotted before the end of another week. But, after all, a lasting good is to come to him from this hard lesson, and often in the years to come, the memory of that lonely, remorseful hour under the dark pines will serve as a wholesome reminder of his besetting sin.

It was with mingled dread and relief that Jerry saw the firefly flashing again among the tree trunks and underbrush, nearer and nearer, brighter and brighter.

"Hello, Mr. Abbott!" he called. "Don't be startled — it's just me." The bad grammar of Jerry's statement of identity was only surpassed by the subdued humility of his tones. "My lantern went out and I had to wait for you."

"All right, lad. Sorry you had to wait, but glad of your company the rest of the way home."

The restored cordiality in Mr. Abbott's voice was very comforting and made Jerry feel the same babyish desire to cry that had nearly gotten the

better of him at an earlier stage of the evening's adventures. His hot temper and his tender heart were Jerry's two vulnerable points.

"You found the gunny-sack all right?" Jerry ventured to remark after they had walked some distance in silence.

"Yes, right where you left it. I've got the letter I was so particular about here in my breast pocket, safe and sound."

"Then maybe you'll trust me to carry the bag. I couldn't do anything with it out here if I tried, unless I dropped it, and you can watch to see I don't do that!"

If there had been a suspicion of sarcasm in Jerry's speech, the superintendent would not have been amused, but the suggestion was so obviously sincere and so full of boyish penitence, that he laughed aloud in his gruff, hearty way, and handed over the mail-sack. Jerry's spirits began to rise by very slow degrees.

The walk home proved no such ordeal as he had dreaded. Wisely concluding that the lesson Jerry needed had been sufficiently impressed on his mind for one time, Mr. Abbott refrained from any further mention of the harrowing subjects of carelessness and irresponsibility. Finding that his usually talkative young companion was feeling still too much disgraced and humiliated to say a great deal, he did most of the talking himself, rambling on, as one subject suggested another, in such an interesting

way that Jerry began to be distracted from gloomy thoughts in spite of himself, and listened with growing attention.

They had nearly reached the mine, when Mr. Abbott, in connection with some incident he was relating, chanced to mention the name of Larry Jukes.

"Mr. Abbott," exclaimed Jerry, quite unconscious that he was interrupting his employer in the middle of a sentence, "there's one thing I *wish* you'd tell me if you know. What has Larry Jukes got against us, and why did he hate Uncle Jonathan Sturtevandt so bitterly?"

"I'm sorry I can't enlighten you, Jerry. I can tell you no more than this. The two men — they were about of an age, you know — were partners, and the greatest cronies, out here in the early days. That was, of course, long before I knew either of them, but I've been so told. After a time your uncle married and lived away, but Larry stayed, working around at different mines or prospecting for a living. Well, a matter of eight or ten years ago, old John Sturtevandt came back and settled on your ranch. He was a widower and had no family left, but the little orphaned grandchild, Maggie. Larry was wild with delight when he heard of his old chum's return — threw down his pick in the middle of a job and hurried over to welcome him. What it was that happened on the occasion of that first meeting of the two old friends, I suppose no one knows but

Larry, now that your uncle is dead. But from that time on they hated each other bitterly. There have been plenty of stories afloat as to the cause of their falling out, but, as I say, no one knows the truth of it but Larry, and he wouldn't tell, no matter who asked him."

"You'll not catch *me* asking him!" declared Jerry, grimly. "I'm never going to speak to him again!"

"If I were you, I wouldn't treasure resentment against the poor old chap. He's old and lonely, and he has an uncertain temper; but he means well, and I dare say he's sorry already that he was so rough with you. It won't hurt you to be a little charitable, Jerry. We all have our failings, you know."

Jerry's cheeks tingled in the dark at that.

"I guess that's so, all right!" he admitted humbly. "Well, I'll speak to him and I'll be decent, but I'll be jiggered if I'm effusively cordial!"

"If you're politely dignified, I guess you'll be doing all that's necessary for a starter. Look out, Jerry! — here's the river. Better keep ahead of my lantern — you can see better."

The narrow foot bridge was without a railing on either side, and one must cross it cautiously, or risk a plunge into one of the liveliest rapids of the river. Beyond the bridge, the glimmer of a half-dozen lights through the foliage indicated the closeness of the mine buildings. A hundred feet of climbing and they would be at the door of the boarding-house.

Jerry, conscious that the time was getting short, summoned all his resolution to say something that had been forming itself in his brain during the last hour.

"Mr. Abbott!"—in spite of his efforts Jerry's voice sounded a little choky—"Mr. Abbott, you haven't said a word about it, but I know, of course, you won't want me to go to Angel for you any more. I shouldn't have the face to ask you to try me again. I shouldn't even feel sure of myself, now. But we do need the money awfully, and it's going to mean harder shifting than ever for Don and Robin if we don't have it. Would you mind trying Don in my place? He's the steadiest old fellow that ever was. I *know* you'd never have to tell *him* you'd found him unworthy of your confidence!"

No one could ever know how much it cost Jerry Arnold to make that unselfish plea for his brother, instead of begging a chance to redeem himself in his own eyes and those of his employer. No one could know, but I fancy some one guessed, for Jerry felt a kindly hand on his shoulder as Mr. Abbott answered:—

"I don't doubt for a minute Don's fitness for the position, but we'll not talk of getting a new mail-carrier till we've discharged the old one, and I trust that won't be soon. To tell you the truth, Jerry, I never had so much confidence in your reliability as I shall have now that you have less confidence in it yourself. Do you get the idea?"

"I guess I do. You think I'm less likely to make mistakes now that my pride has been shattered, than when I was so cock-sure of myself. I'll try mighty hard not to disappoint you again, Mr. Abbott. I'm — I'm awfully grateful — I can't begin to tell you ——"

"Don't try to. I shall expect you Tuesday evening, as usual, so let's say no more about it."

Jerry couldn't have said any more about it if he had tried. He was past saying anything just then, and could only clutch the hand that Mr. Abbott held out to him in a grip of gratitude that made its owner wince. Then he turned and ran up the steps to the boarding-house.

The door flew open, and there in the bright glow of the lamplight stood Robin, looking tired and pale, but with relief and happiness illumining her face as she recognized her brother's step.

"Oh, Jerry, I'm so glad you've come. I've been imagining all sorts of dreadful things that might have happened to you!" the superintendent heard her cry, and then, through the open door, he saw her standing with her hands on Jerry's shoulders, looking into his face searchingly, but with such sweetness and almost motherly tenderness, that the eyes of the unseen observer filled with unaccustomed tears.

"The boy'll come out all right, with a sister like that to look after him," he was thinking, as he went on up the trail and blew out the light of his lantern at his door.

CHAPTER XVI

A HOME FLIGHT

SUPPER time at the Robin's Nest had been the loneliest hour of the day, ever since Robin went to Twenty Rattles. During the day there was plenty of work, indoors and out, to keep Maggie and the boys from being too forlorn, and after supper one could always go to bed and forget one's troubles in sleep. But for an hour after sundown, when the pale yellow afterglow was slowly fading over the western buttes, and the insects in the dry grass were chirping their sweet, monotonous chorus; when the lamps were first lighted and the supper table was being set for three lonesome young persons, — then was the time when it seemed to them all that they couldn't stand it to let Robin stay away another week.

It was more than three months now since she had been at home, save for an hour now and then snatched from her manifold duties at the mine. The husband of the cook so long expected from Minersville had had another relapse in July, and the date of their arrival at Twenty Rattles had been in consequence again indefinitely postponed.

All through the long, fiercely hot days of summer Robin had stuck to her post indomitably. The con-

stant hard work and the heat had told upon her. She had grown thinner and lost much of her pretty bloom, but she had kept her health in spite of the strain, and had refused with quiet firmness — Jerry called it obstinacy — to give up the position so long as it remained open to her. And the knowledge that the bank at Minersville held nearly a hundred dollars of her earnings to help them through the coming winter, was more comfort to her and Don than any one else could know.

The money Jerry earned carrying the mail, together with that which Don had made selling vegetables from his garden, went a long way toward paying the present running expenses of the Robin's Nest household. The butcher from Angel passed only once a week with his wagon, so their meat bill was low. Jerry's rod kept the table supplied with trout, and when Don could get away from the ranch for an hour's hunting, he nearly always came home with squirrels or quail, or maybe a jack-rabbit from the chaparral. Jerry turned up his nose at the last-named delicacy, but Don and Maggie had true mountain appetites and laughed at his fussiness.

The garden, thanks to Don's unflagging energy in weeding, cultivating, and watering, had proven a great success. The ground was fairly rich, and the spring brook had continued to furnish ample water for irrigating purposes, even when the rains had been over for weeks and one could cross the shrunken Mercedes on stepping-stones almost any-

where. Besides keeping their own table supplied with fresh vegetables, Don had carried many a basketful of green pease, corn, string-beans, beets, radishes, lettuce, summer squash, and tomatoes, to Twenty Rattles, or even as far as Angel Flat, and the mines that clustered about that hamlet. Now he was watching anxiously the progress of a good-sized potato patch that was expected to furnish a winter supply of potatoes for the Robin's Nest.

Jerry had worked pretty faithfully under Don's supervision, but it could not be denied that farming was not his forte, and he was always immensely relieved when Don sent him away on some errand to a neighboring ranch or mine, or bade him go down to the river and catch a mess of trout for dinner.

As for Maggie, she had done her part nobly, so happy in the companionship of the new cousins who had brought the brightness of youth into her lonely little life, that she never dreamed of complaining of the household cares that rested entirely on her shoulders since Robin's departure, save for an occasional lift in dish-washing or sweeping from Jerry. If her cooking wasn't quite up to their sister's, and if the house did sometimes get into that mysterious condition known as at "sixes and sevens," her will to please was so earnest and her industry so unflagging, that the boys never dreamed of criticizing, and always carried to Robin enthusiastic praise of their little housekeeper. Jerry ate slice

after slice of the bread that was still her weak point, and never admitted to any one but his amused sister that it took "lots of nerve" to do so.

So the summer had passed, and the hazy loveliness of early autumn brooded among the hills. Only the tar-weed and the sturdy brakes remained green on the long slopes. The flowers were nearly all gone, though one might now and then come upon a belated clump of golden-yellow daisies, or a spray of scarlet columbine. The air was heavy now through the long, golden days, with the pungent smoke of far-away forest fires, and sweet with the incense of sun-warmed pine and spruce and cedar. For many weeks there had been no drop of rain, and for days the sun had risen and set in a cloudless monotony of blue.

As I was saying, the supper hour at the Robin's Nest was the loneliest hour of the day for Don and Maggie and Jerry, and, since of all the days of the week Sunday was the very loneliest, it followed inevitably that the supper hour on Sunday evening should be a time of concentrated melancholy and depression.

Maggie's "Come to supper, boys!" was received on the Sunday evening in question with yawns, sighs, and a lamentable lack of enthusiasm. Jerry lazily lounged out of the hammock on the porch where he had been dreaming, and Don got up very deliberately from the piazza steps, where he had brought his book for a last glimmer of daylight. It was a

very sober little group that gathered around the table on which Maggie had set out the simple supper of bread and milk, cookies and cottage-cheese. In silence she filled the three yellow bowls with Windfall's rich, creamy milk. In silence Don and Jerry broke their bread into their bowls.

"I call this all-fired lonesome," complained Jerry, dolefully, between two languid spoonfuls, when the silence became so uncomfortably profound that some one really had to say something.

"It's not so hilariously cheerful as it might be," admitted Don. "I doubt if anybody'd mistake us for a comic opera."

"If Robin would come it would be all right, straight away. It's just having her away that's the matter."

"Right you are, Maggie!" cried Jerry, and Don echoed the sentiment with sad enthusiasm.

"It's so pleasant to know I'm being missed!" laughed a sweet voice in the doorway. "I know now that eavesdroppers don't *always* hear evil of themselves."

Jerry's whoop of delight voiced everybody's feelings. Robin found herself embraced by three pairs of arms at once, and overwhelmed with more questions than she could possibly answer for some time to come.

"How'd you get away just at supper time?"

"How long can you stay?"

"Have you had your supper?"

"Aren't you awfully tired?"

"Do let me sit down and talk for a minute, and I'll tell you all about it," she protested. "I might as well have gotten into a cave of bears."

Maggie flew for another bowl and spoon; Don set a chair at Robin's old place at the table, while Jerry took off his sister's hat with much fumbling of the pins and a tug or two, quite unintentional, at her hair.

"You see, to-morrow is Labor Day," she began to explain.

"They all are," put in Jerry, with a groan of recollection.

"Jerry mustn't interrupt!" frowned Maggie, severely.

"Go on, Robin," encouraged Don. "We'd got as far as Labor Day."

"No, we hadn't! We don't get to Labor Day till to-morrow," contended Jerry.

"We certainly won't get anywhere before to-morrow if you naughty children don't let me get on with my story."

"Please forgive us! It's all because your coming home has made us so light-hearted," apologized Jerry.

"Light-minded is the word, if you're referring to yourself. Go on, Robin, I'll choke him off if he says another word."

"Well, as I was saying, to-morrow is Labor ——"

"Chestnuts!" shouted Jerry, the irrepressible,

and the story had to be interrupted again, while Don tied a handkerchief securely over the culprit's mouth — a feat which was not accomplished without a struggle, you may be sure.

When Robin finally obtained a hearing, she explained that Mr. Abbott had come into the kitchen to speak to her while the men were at supper. He had said she was looking tired, and had told her to leave the evening work for Larry to do and go home for the night. And since it was Labor Day on the morrow, the men would not be working, and they could get along very well on what Larry would prepare for them, until noon.

"I must be back at the mine by eleven to-morrow morning to get dinner," she concluded, "but that's hours away, and I'm not going to think of it, even, to-night. Oh, you don't know how good it seems to be with you all again!"

"Maybe you don't think it seems good to have you here," said Don, hanging affectionately over the back of her chair.

The evenings were beginning to be cool — indeed their California evenings had never been very warm — and Robin's suggestion that a little fire be kindled in the living-room met with no opposition. Don brought in a great armful of evergreen boughs that he had trimmed from the trees about the house, and with these he started a snapping, fragrant little blaze on the long-cold hearth. After Jerry and Maggie had disposed of the supper dishes, with

more celerity than was altogether compatible with cleanliness, the family gathered around the fire, Robin resting luxuriously in the big rocker, Maggie perching on its arm, with her curly dark head just above her cousin's brown one, and the boys sprawling comfortably on the big bearskin at their sister's feet.

Such a cosy, fire-lighted visit as they had! It didn't seem possible that this was the same house which had been so empty and forlorn an hour before. There was so much to ask and to tell that the conversation never lulled for several hours, and then, when everything had been said, it was delightful just to sit quietly together, listening to the cheery snapping of Don's fire of spruce and cedar boughs, and watching the swarms of little red sparks that chased one another through the feathery twigs.

I think the little clock on the mantel really hated to disturb this happy scene, but when clocks are wound as tight as Don had wound this one that very Sunday, they have to do their duty, whether or no.

"Eight — nine — ten — eleven — why, children, it's twelve o'clock!" exclaimed Robin. "Where *has* the evening gone?"

"Mr. Abbott sent you home to rest. You ought to have gone to bed long ago. We're a selfish lot to have kept you up till midnight," said Don, self-reproachfully.

"Nothing could have rested me more than this has done, but we mustn't stay up any longer, or I won't be in trim for work to-morrow."

"I wish you didn't have to go back to-morrow," mourned Maggie. "It's just awful lonesome without you!"

"I know, dearie, and it's lonesome for me, too; but maybe it won't be much longer before I can come home 'for keeps,' as Jerry used to say. Mr. Abbott had a letter from Mrs. Smith the other day, saying her husband was much better, and they hoped to come up very soon."

"'The sooner the quicker!'" quoted Jerry, sententiously.

With a good night kiss all around, the family separated for the night, Don and Jerry climbing the steep stairs to their chamber under the roof, while Robin followed Maggie into the cosy little bedroom, undressed, and laid herself down to rest, with the homesick longing gone from her breast for the first night in many weeks.

CHAPTER XVII

HOW SEPTEMBER TURNED TO MAY

ROBIN had grown so accustomed to waking very early that she opened her eyes next morning long before Maggie's dark curls had stirred from the pillow. Her first thought was that she must be up at once, and starting breakfast for the weary night-shift men. Then, with a delightful sense of relaxation, as she realized where she was, she sank back upon her pillows for another nap. This time she slept long and soundly, but was awakened at last by an animated discussion outside her half-open door.

"I tell you she's dead tired — let her alone!" Don was protesting in a disgusted undertone.

"But she's got to be back at eleven, and she'll be mad enough if we let her waste all the morning sleeping!" insisted Jerry.

"Besides, my breakfast will be all dried up and cold and horrid for her if we wait any longer," declared Maggie. "The trout and muffins are just exactly perfect this minute."

Robin jumped out of bed, crying merrily: —

"Those in favor of getting me up have the best of the argument and the majority of the votes. I'll be

dressed in two minutes, so sit right down for your breakfast and don't wait for me."

But of course they did wait, and nothing suffered a particle for the few minutes' delay. The coffee was clear as amber, the muffins were the lightest and crispest and most beautifully browned that Maggie had ever made, and Robin declared she had not eaten anything so delicious in many a day as the trout which Jerry had been up with the sun to catch for her breakfast.

It was an unusually beautiful morning, in a country where every morning was a revelation of beauty and freshness. A cool, smoky breeze was blowing, and a drifting haze of white clouds alternately hid and revealed the sun. All the doors and windows in the Robin's Nest were wide open, and the murmur of the soft wind in the pines, the homelike carol of a lone robin, the mellow gurgle of the spring brook over its stony bed, floated pleasantly in to the ears of the breakfasters.

Just as the last crisp trout was disappearing, a step was heard outside and a brisk rap on the open door.

"Maybe it's Larry Jukes," said Don, jumping up to answer the knock.

Jerry, who had not yet been able to forgive and forget a certain memorable interview between himself and Larry, promptly assumed an expression of chilling civility, but dropped it as promptly for one of pleased surprise.

"That isn't Larry — it's Mr. Forrest!" he exclaimed, throwing down his knife and fork, and hurrying into the living-room.

"Good morning, Mr. Forrest," said Robin, following her brothers to the door and greeting the newcomer with a welcoming smile. "Have you come to tell me I'm staying too long? Did Mr. Abbott send you after me?"

"Not a bit of it, Miss Robin," Mr. Forrest replied. "I did come on business, though, and I walked very fast for fear you would start back before I got here. And Larry gave us the usual horrible concoction he calls coffee, for breakfast this morning. I don't want you to think I'm hinting — wouldn't give you such an impression for worlds — but —— "

"Maggie, dear, run and put the coffee-pot back on the stove for a minute," interrupted Robin, comprehendingly. "It won't be fresh, Mr. Forrest, but it was very good this morning."

"It will be nectar, I assure you. I only hope you didn't think I was hinting?"

"How could we?" asked Robin, reassuringly, while Jerry refilled the cream pitcher and Don reported apologetically that the last muffin was gone.

"We haven't been so hungry all summer," he declared. "I guess it was because Robin was here."

"I can believe that," said the young man, heartily. "Our gain has been very decidedly your loss. I suppose you wouldn't be exactly sorry to get her

back for good and all," he went on meditatively. "Hasn't she been away long enough, Maggie? Aren't you tired of keeping house for a couple of ravenous young bears?"

"What is it you are getting at, Mr. Forrest?" demanded Robin, with directness. "You said you came on business."

"I did. Very unpleasant business. I came to inform you — really this is very disagreeable! Miss Arnold, can't you guess the melancholy truth and save me from blurting it out in all its baldness?"

"You look mighty cheerful for any one who's bringing bad news!" scoffed Jerry.

"Wouldn't you call it disagreeable, young fellow, to have to go to a lady and tell her that her services were no longer required? — in short, that she was, so to speak, 'bounced' from her position?"

"What do you mean? Please don't keep me in suspense!" entreated Robin, her eyes shining with what may have been dread, but which looked much more like hope.

"I mean, to express it in the elegant English in which Larry made the announcement to Mr. Abbott, that 'them thar Smiths from down below hez came!'"

"The cook!" cried Don, eagerly.

"The cook and the cook's husband."

"Whoop-la! Glory Hallelujah!" yelled Jerry.

"Oh, Robin, you won't have to go back ever again!" cried Maggie, joyously.

Then every one but Robin began to talk at once. And what did Robin "do then, poor thing"? She wouldn't want me to tell, for she was dreadfully ashamed of herself, but I do not believe you will think the less of her for it. She ran away from them all into the little bedroom, threw herself on the bed, and cried — not from sorrow over the loss of her position, far from it! but from sheer joy that the long hard task that duty had set her was done at last, done without shirking, and that the home life she loved was to begin again.

She was not allowed to weep long, however, for Don sought her out, dried her eyes on the sheet, and dragged her back to the living-room, blushing and apologetic, with tears on her lashes and a tremulous smile on her lips.

"Do you think me a perfect goose, Mr. Forrest?" she asked in a husky little voice.

"I do not," he replied simply, but something in his tone made Robin blush more than ever, and wish she hadn't asked his opinion.

"I forgot to tell you," said John Forrest, "that Mr. Abbott sent word that you didn't need to come back to the mine for your things. He said he would have Mrs. Smith put them in your trunk and Larry would bring it over some time to-morrow. And here's something else I nearly forgot."

He took an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Robin. When she opened it, out fell a crisp check. Jerry picked it up.

"*Pay to order of Roberta Arnold twenty-five and no one-hundredths dol*——"

"Why, Jerry," Robin interrupted, "you can't be reading it right. That's fifteen dollars more than Mr. Abbott owes me."

"Do you think I can't read?" asked offended Jerry, handing her the check to see for herself.

"Maybe his note will explain," suggested Mr. Forrest, and Robin looked to see.

"*Dear Miss Arnold:*" she read aloud; "*Forrest will explain matters to you, but I have a word to say on my own account. I want to thank you for your faithfulness and*——" Here she stopped short, and, in spite of protests, read to herself the remainder of the superintendent's note.

"He says," she said, as she folded the sheet and put it back into the envelope, "that since he has not given me two weeks' notice of dismissal, as he is in the habit of doing with his employees, it is only proper that he should add two weeks' wages to the sum already due me. I don't quite understand his reasoning," she commented, with a puzzled look, "for of course I knew all the time that my position was only a temporary one. I feel as if I ought not to take it, when I haven't earned it. Is it usual, Mr. Forrest?"

"The case isn't a usual one, and can't be dealt with by usual methods," evaded that young man. "My advice would be not to quarrel with the good the gods provide. You've certainly earned all you're getting, and a lot more, Miss Robin!"

"I don't know about that. I only know that people are very good to me, and that I'm more grateful and happy than I can tell."

"Oh, what a nice day this is!" sighed Maggie.

"'O frabjous day!' " crooned Jerry, rapturously.

"They say one swallow doesn't make a summer," mused John Forrest, smiling, "but I can testify before any ornithological society that I've seen one Robin turn autumn weather into spring."

"It's an extraordinarily jolly occasion, and ought to be celebrated accordingly. Anyway, it's unpatriotic to work on Labor Day. I move we have a picnic."

"I second Jerry's motion, with the proviso that I be invited to join it," said Mr. Forrest.

"Of course you shall be invited," said Don, cordially.

"However much we may dislike your society, we couldn't be so rude as to leave you out when it's your news that has made a picnic possible."

Maggie regarded Robin with astonished disapproval of this grudging invitation, but it was noticeable that its recipient seemed quite satisfied.

The day was so alluringly beautiful, and the hearts of the five people at the Robin's Nest were so in tune to its loveliness, that it would have been hard indeed to settle down to ordinary tasks, and Jerry's happy proposal received unanimous approval.

"I know a magnificent place for a picnic," said Mr. Forrest, "but it's a long walk — way up to the Saddle between the Upper and Middle Buttes. I'm afraid, boys, that your sister is too well tired out for such a tramp."

"No, indeed — I could walk for miles to-day!" cried Robin, ambitiously.

"Maybe you could, but you'd be tuckered to-morrow," objected Don.

"What's the matter with Stubby's being invited?" asked Jerry. "He could carry Robin and the baskets — pack 'em, I suppose you natives would say — and the rest of us could walk the distance easily."

As usual, Jerry had to come to the rescue with one of his bright ideas. Robin protested against the absurdity of saying she could not walk, but her objections were overruled, and Jerry was dispatched to find and saddle the little donkey.

Robin and Maggie retired to the kitchen to clear away the breakfast things and "scare up" a lunch, as Jerry expressed it. Don hurried out to attend to several little tasks that could not be left undone, even at the risk of being unpatriotic. John Forrest, being assured that nothing was expected of him but a little patience, sat down on the steps in the morning sunlight, fanned by soft breaths of the sweet, Indian-summer-like air, and thinking of many things, but conscious that through all his wandering thoughts ran an undercurrent of happi-

ness. Perhaps there had been a little homesickness in his heart all these years — a loneliness that was quite routed to-day by the cordial, simple friendliness with which the dwellers in the Robin's Nest were receiving and making him one of themselves on this day of their rejoicing.

CHAPTER XVIII

A PICNIC AND AN UNINVITED GUEST

It was a long climb from the Robin's Nest to the chosen picnic ground, and, thanks to the impromptu nature of the plan, the picnickers were rather late in starting. Consequently it was well on toward noon, when, warm and weary, they came out at last upon the high, broad crest of the ridge that dipped between the Upper and Middle Buttes to form the "Saddle." The view before and behind them was magnificent here, and Mr. Forrest's choice was approved by exclamations of delight from every one save Maggie.

"You're not going to stop *here*, are you?" she asked in a disappointed tone.

"Why not? I don't see anything wrong with this place!" Jerry had sunk to the ground, mopping his brow with his handkerchief.

Mr. Forrest had already helped Robin down from Stubby's back, and Don was looking for a shady place for the lunch baskets.

"It's pretty here, but we're nowhere near at the prettiest place," Maggie protested. "It's lots higher up there." She pointed to the top of the Upper Butte, which rose steeply still several hundred feet above them — the highest point anywhere in the region.

"It would mean a good half-hour more of puffing and panting to get up there, and we're all tired now, Maggie," expostulated Mr. Forrest.

"I'm not!" maintained the little girl, shaking back the curls from her brown little face and looking at the young man with a shade of condescension in her black eyes. "I'm not, but of course I'm used to mountains. I've lived here ever since I can remember."

"I've been at Twenty Rattles a matter of four years myself, but I'll have to admit I've never had energy enough to climb to the top of the Upper Butte. I don't believe you'd find it such fun, yourself, Maggie. It's steeper than it looks, and where it isn't rocky, it's slippery as ice with pine needles."

Maggie looked superior.

"Why, I've been up there just *lots* of times!" she said.

"You, Maggie?" exclaimed Robin. "You little mountain sprite! Do you mean that you have been way up there, all alone, miles from everywhere? What did you come for?"

"I don't know what for — only I liked it. I wasn't never — ever lonesome up there. I've stayed all day, lots of times. Gran'pa never cared. It was my place. Oh, it's so nice up there! I *wish* you weren't too tired to go!"

The child's voice was so full of disappointment and pleading that the others hadn't the heart to refuse her, even though they did feel that they had

had climb enough for one day. Robin mounted her steed again; Jerry, with a prodigious sigh of resignation, got to his feet, and the cavalcade moved on.

Maggie, delighted, flew ahead to lead the way, looking back now and then over her shoulder to see if the rest were close behind, or to call back some warning where the path was especially steep or rough. Light-footed and tireless, flitting on just above them with her loose black hair blown about her shoulders, looking down with bright eyes and laughter from some overhanging rock or huge, fallen tree trunk, she seemed, as Mr. Forrest told Robin, like a little oread strayed away from the mountains of ancient Greece to dwell in these mountains of the western world.

Robin laughed at the fancy.

"Who ever heard of an oread in a brown calico frock, with hobnails in her shoes? I'll tell you what Maggie is. She's a naughty little elf, beguiling us up to some place where we shall all fall over a precipice and break our necks!"

"Yes, and they'll name the place after the tragedy, and all the tourists will come up to see the spot where we met a romantic end," suggested Don, who was walking at Stubby's head. "They'll call it 'Death Drop' or ——"

"Why not 'The Ninny-hammers' Plunge' or 'The Fall of the Freaks'?" grumbled Jerry, who was trailing along behind, holding on to poor

Stubby's tail for assistance at the steepest places. "What a set of lunatics we were to let that young one drag us way up here! I'm about dead."

The conversation languished after that, for all the breath one had was needed in climbing, and the rest of the ascent was accompanied only by the crunching of the stony trail under Stubby's nimble feet, and the hard breathing of the climbers. Robin begged once to be allowed to dismount and give the little beast she rode a rest, but Don sternly bade her sit still.

It was over at last — the long pull up the butte, and they stood together at the very crest of the mountain, with the whole world, so it seemed to their dazzled eyes, spread below them, and with the wind in their faces so thrillingly pure and sweet that it must have blown to them straight from the blue Pacific — two hundred miles away. Before them stretched the hill ranges, darkly green near by with their forests of cone-bearing trees; farther away growing purple and blue, misty with distance and the haze of early autumn. There were giant trees here on the crest of the butte, trees that towered so high above them that the sound of the wind came down to them very faintly. There was no underbrush anywhere in sight, and the trees bore no branches for so great a height above the ground that the place seemed like a vast cathedral, with mighty columns to uphold its lofty roof of green. So wonderful, so holy a place did it seem, in its beauty, its remoteness, and its peace, that the little band of pic-

"THERE SHE STOOD, QUITE STILL."

nickers for a long moment could find no word of comment. Silent, they stood side by side, gazing about them in delight, wonder and awe.

"I give up, Maggie," Mr. Forrest admitted at last in a sober voice. "My picnic ground pales into insignificance beside this place of yours."

Jerry shook off the unaccustomed seriousness with which the beauty of the surroundings had overwhelmed even him.

"What he means in English, Peggy, is that your spot knocks the spots off his spot! It does, too."

"Knocks the spots! Oh, Jerry, how can you spoil it all by such an expression?" cried Robin, in horror. "I don't believe you have any soul!"

"Well, I can't keep keyed up to such a pitch all the time. I like all this" — with a comprehensive gesture — "as well as you do; but that doesn't alter the fact that I'm awfully tired and hungry."

This sentiment evidently found an echo in the humble breast of one member of the party. Stubby laid back his ears, stuck out his nose, and brayed long and emphatically.

"It's no use, Robin," sympathized Don. "No one could possibly stay up in the clouds long with such earthy people as Jerry and Stubby about. You might as well come down yourself, and get the lunch unpacked."

And Robin sighed and obeyed.

It was while the picnickers were peacefully lunching under the pines that something happened.

"Hark — what was that?" asked Robin, holding up a hand to stop Jerry in the middle of a remark.

They all listened, and presently glanced excitedly at each other, for the sound had come again, this time nearer.

"Is it a mountain lion, do you suppose?" asked Jerry, breathlessly.

But Mr. Forrest shook his head, and Maggie said decidedly: —

"No — 'tain't a mountain lion. I heard one once, right back of our house, up the mountain. Gran'pa knew what it was right away, but he couldn't go up and shoot it 'cause the snow was so dreadfully deep."

"Probably it's a coyote howling. Don't you think so, Mr. Forrest?" asked Don; but before the latter could answer, Robin cried: —

"It's coming straight toward us across the Saddle — hark!"

"It isn't a dog?" queried Jerry, doubtfully, after they had listened in silence to the melancholy sounds coming ever nearer and louder, as the unseen animal approached the Upper Butte, apparently by the same trail they had followed.

Stubby was growing excited, pointing his long, furry, mouse-colored ears in the direction of the nearing mystery.

"Wish we'd brought the rifle," said Jerry. "You haven't a revolver about you, have you, Mr. Forrest?"

"Nothing more formidable than a jack-knife,

Jerry. But I hardly think we'll feel the need of firearms. There comes the stranger, now. See, Miss Robin — just this side of the big live-oak down on the Saddle! My, what a beauty!"

A beautiful greyhound, its lithe, graceful body bounding lightly up the rough trail, was galloping directly toward them, pausing now and then to lift its head and bay mournfully. Its high breeding was evident enough, but it was so thin that every rib showed plainly along its gray sides; a lost dog, and a half starved one, obviously.

"He's after us, all right," said Don. "See, he's circling around that big rock just as we had to do."

"Poor fellow — probably he thinks we're his lost master," said Robin.

"No, he doesn't!" contradicted Jerry. "You can be sure he would know his master from anybody else. He's just hoping we're good Samaritans."

"Be careful, Sis. He may be cross," protested Don, holding back his sister who was starting impulsively forward to greet the poor dog. Robin's love for animals never admitted a judicious doubt as to their good nature.

Within a few yards of them the animal stopped short, lifting his aristocratic head, and gazing steadily, beseechingly at them out of a pair of beautiful, wistful brown eyes. Then he pointed his slim nose skyward and bayed again.

"Poor old boy — he's trying to tell us all about his troubles," said Mr. Forrest; but Robin had

dropped to her knees and was talking reassuringly to the hound, holding out a sandwich toward him and coaxing him to come and take it. Evidently he had been used to affectionate treatment, for, after only a minute's hesitation, he came up to her, wagging his tail, in a slow, tentative way that said, plainer than words:—

"I don't know who you are, Madam, but I like your looks and I'm ready to meet you halfway. And as to this sandwich — well, since you insist — ah, thank you! Any more like that around?"

"Help yourself, old fellow!" urged Jerry, hospitably, dumping a miscellaneous assortment of provisions on the ground, and the uninvited guest hastened to dispose of his share of the picnic lunch.

"Where do you suppose he came from?" Robin wondered aloud. But that was a question destined never to be answered. From his famished condition it looked as if the hound had been lost in the mountains for some days at least. Whether he had strayed away from some hunter or traveler, or had wandered from some mine or lumber camp, he only knew, and the story was beyond the power of even his eloquent eyes and tail to express. On his neck was a handsome collar, but the silver plate that adorned it gave no clue to the ownership of the wearer. "Trump" was the legend engraved thereon — "Trump," and nothing more.

"'Trump'!" read Don, bending over the dog's

neck to examine the inscription. "So you're Trump, are you?"

With a whine of delight at the sound of his name, the dog put his paws on Don's breast and licked the boy's hands ecstatically. Don put his arm around Trump's neck, stroked his long, silken ears, and talked to him with the understanding and sympathy of one who has known and loved dogs from his babyhood.

"He's somebody's pet, all right. I'm sorry for the fellow that lost him," said Jerry.

"Do you suppose we'll ever find his owner?" asked Robin of the engineer.

"Very doubtful, I'm afraid. He may have wandered for miles before he struck our trail and looked us up," replied Mr. Forrest. "You made a great mistake not having your master's name instead of your own on that collar, Master Trump!" he added.

"What are we going to do with him?" asked Maggie.

"Adopt him, of course," said Jerry, without a minute's hesitation.

"I don't know about that," said Don, slowly, his hand still resting caressingly on the dog's head as he spoke. "He's a fine dog, and he's sort of thrown himself on our hospitality; but it would be awfully foolish in us to adopt another member into our family, when it's all we can do to keep ourselves going. Trump would eat pretty near as much as one of us,

and I'm willing to wager he's not been used to rough fare."

"Don's so everlastingly foresighted," complained Jerry aside to Mr. Forrest; but if he expected sympathy from that source he was doomed to disappointment.

"It's well for you that he is, young fellow!"

"But we can't turn him away to starve, Don, of course!" cried Robin. "That would be simply outrageous!"

"He can have his quarter of all my meals," declared Jerry, magnanimously; an offer the generosity of which was perhaps influenced by the fact that he had just lunched heartily and couldn't realize how hungry he would be at supper time.

"I hadn't meant to suggest that we let him starve," said Don, a trifle hurt at the implication of hard-heartedness on his part. "I only thought perhaps we'd better try to find him a good home somewhere else."

"Suppose you let me do the adopting," suggested Mr. Forrest, quietly. "I've been meaning to get a dog for a year past, and Mr. Abbott has often said he'd like to have a good one at the mine. If Trump's master never turns up, he can have a good home at Twenty Rattles as long as he lives."

Hearing his name, the dog came over to where Mr. Forrest was sitting, laid his head on the young man's knee, and looked up questioningly into his face.

"Is it a go, old boy? Do you want to be my dog?" asked John Forrest.

Trump whined softly, as if to say he understood. Then, lifting one gray paw, he offered it to his new master, and the two shook hands soberly on their bargain.

CHAPTER XIX

TRUMP JUSTIFIES HIS NAME

For several hours longer the party lingered on the crest of the mountain, enjoying the calm beauty of the afternoon, the rest from toil, and, best of all, one another's companionship after the weeks of separation.

Robin had tucked a book into one of the baskets, and for a while Mr. Forrest read aloud, while his hearers reclined luxuriously on the soft carpet of pine needles, listening dreamily to the sound of the wind in the tree-tops and to his low, well-modulated voice.

When the sun began to sink low over the western hills, the book was laid aside, and they all sat silent, watching the beautiful decline of the day. From the valleys before them the sunshine was gradually withdrawn, higher and higher up their sloping sides, till only the very tops of the hills were still bathed in the warm, bright glow. Mysterious purple shadows gathered among the trees in the depths of these sun-deserted valleys. As the sun sank lower and lower, the western sky began to burn with a strange, lurid light, like the glow of some vast conflagration, leagues upon leagues away.

"It's the smoke in the air that makes it look so funny," Maggie volunteered. "I've watched it like that from here lots of times, and sometimes the fires have come so near that I could see little red streaks of flame running up the trees, 'way, 'way off."

"Don't the fires ever get up this far?" asked Robin.

"Sometimes they do," replied John Forrest. "Haven't you ever noticed that there are none of these big trees that are not charred, more or less, up to a good many feet above the ground? That is the work of fires that weren't fierce enough to destroy the larger trees, but succeeded in scarring their trunks and in cleaning out all the underbrush beneath them. Once or twice since I've been at Twenty Rattles fires have come near enough so that we've had to quit work at the mine and turn out all hands to fight them."

"How did you do it?" asked Don, who was always anxious to learn how to meet the emergencies that might arise in their new surroundings.

"Chiefly by felling trees and clearing out brush to make a space the fire can't cross, and by 'back-firing,' taking advantage of the direction the wind is almost sure to blow at certain times of the day. It isn't so very hard to control a forest fire if it's taken in time and the wind isn't too high."

"What starts 'em?" inquired Jerry.

"Different things. Sometimes sparks from a locomotive, but probably oftener somebody's carelessness in building camp-fires in the woods in very

dry weather. It's worth bearing in mind up here that the man who forgets to throw water on the embers of the fire he is leaving, or who empties his pipe into the dry grass, is likely to cost the government thousands of acres of the finest timber in the world, to say nothing of endangering life and the property of individuals."

Jerry wriggled uncomfortably as he remembered how on his last trip to Angel he had struck a match to relight his lantern and had thrown it, still burning, aside into the underbrush, never thinking to watch whether or not it went out. Well, he wouldn't be guilty of that sort of folly again.

"Don't you think it's time we were starting home?" asked Robin. "See, it's almost dark down at the Robin's Nest."

They turned away from the glory of the sunset to look where she pointed. Far, far below them, to the east, and beyond a slender thread of darkening silver that was the Mercedes, they could see the Robin's Nest, looking like a child's house of blocks, set in its little green clearing among the trees.

The lunch baskets were tied securely to Stubby's saddle, one on each side, — Robin having declared she was entirely rested and preferred to walk home,— and the picnic party started down the butte, slipping and sliding more or less till the comparatively level ground of the Saddle was reached. From there down to the road and river, the slope, though constant, was not so steep.

They had covered half the distance home, when something happened so exciting as to eclipse the previous interest of the day. Don and Jerry were listening with eager attention to John Forrest's description of his hairbreadth escape from a great forest fire in Canada, some years before. Maggie was leading Stubby, and Trump was trotting quietly at the side of his new master. The sunshine was, of course, quite gone from this, the northeast slope of the mountain, and it was beginning to be twilight along the trail.

It was Don who heard a sudden faint cry of utter terror that made his heart stand still.

"Hark!" he commanded. "What is that?"

Jerry and Mr. Forrest looked at him in amazement, for they had heard nothing. But Maggie, too, had heard.

"It's Robin — it's Robin!" she gasped. "Where is she?"

For Robin was nowhere to be seen. The little group scattered, running hither and yon to look for the familiar figure that had been in their midst only a few minutes before.

But there was one member of the party that did not hesitate. That one cry had been enough for Trump, and like a flash he was leaping away toward the sound, his head erect, his slim gray body rising in long swift bounds over the tar-weed and ferns, as he covered the ground between with the marvelous speed and grace of his noble breed. He found her

but a little way from the trail, from which she had strayed in a vain search for late wild flowers. Only an intervening knoll had hidden her from the eyes of her companions.

There she stood, quite still, frozen with horror, and on a huge log in front of her, coiled within a yard of her breast, was a great rattlesnake, its malignant eyes fixed on her face, its warning rattle horribly distinct in the deathly hush that had followed her one faint scream.

A moment more and the hound rose into the air, just cleared the girl's shoulder, and landed on the log, almost on top of the serpent, which struck at him viciously. But Trump's teeth were already fastened in the snake's neck, and he was shaking the rattling, writhing thing furiously.

It was all over in a moment. The snake lay mangled and bloody, still twitching, but quite dead, upon the ground. Robin was sobbing in Don's arms, while Forrest, in his usual quiet, steady voice, although his face was white and his hands shaking, was trying to calm and reassure her. Maggie and Jerry were hugging Trump and calling him by more flattering and endearing terms than, it is safe to say, he had ever heard in his life.

"Be careful, there, children," Forrest warned them sharply. "He may have been bitten and have some of the venom about him. You can't be over-cautious."

However, a thorough examination revealed no

wound on the brave dog. Evidently he had been too quick for his enemy's fatal fangs.

Before resuming their homeward journey, every one but Robin took an interested, if shuddering, look at the dead rattler. It was an immense specimen, with the thick, diamond-marked body and ugly, triangular head of its species. Part of its rattles had been broken off in some previous battle or accident, but from the appearance of those it still wore, and from its size, Mr. Forrest declared that it must be counted only second to the famous snake said to have been killed thirty years before on the present site of Twenty Rattles, and which had given the mine its name.

After her nerve-shattering experience, Robin was glad enough to get home again and to cuddle down in the big rocking-chair before a fine fire of pitch-pine chips and cedar boughs, while Don sat on the arm of her chair and warmed her cold hands in his, and Maggie and Jerry prepared an impromptu supper.

Mr. Forrest and Trump had said good night at the bridge, and gone on up to the mine.

Late that evening the young engineer of Twenty Rattles threw aside impatiently the shabby little book, bound in Russia leather, to which he had confided his secrets so long, but which had become strangely inadequate of late.

"Come here, Trump!" he said.

Trump came, put his forepaws on Forrest's knees,

and looked into his face with sad, loving, unfathomable eyes.

"Trump — old fellow!" — the young man laid his cheek against the dog's head; "I wish I could thank you. But you wouldn't understand, dog! You couldn't know what it would have meant, if you hadn't ——"

He stopped short with a shudder of recollection, and Trump licked his hands and face to show that a dog could love, though it could not understand.

CHAPTER XX

AUTUMN DAYS AND EVENINGS

THE weeks following Robin's home-coming were very busy ones, for many things had to be done in preparation for the coming winter. Don's and Jerry's out-of-door duties kept them busy from morning till night. The open acres beyond the spring brook were planted to fruit trees, berry and currant bushes, and enclosed within a strong fence of rails and barbed wire. Already a thrifty row of strawberry plants was flourishing along one side of the vegetable garden. A good supply of winter vegetables was harvested and stowed away in bins in the large, dry cellar of the Robin's Nest—potatoes, turnips, beets, cabbages and Hubbard squashes.

Robin's fruit cupboard was the pride of her heart. Jerry and Maggie had roamed the mountains and come home laden with heaping baskets of wild blackberries and gooseberries, which Robin had made into delicious jams and jellies and preserves. All the tomatoes and cucumbers from their garden, more than they could eat or sell, she had respectively canned or pickled. Occasionally, Jerry would bring home from Angel Flat a basket of peaches, apples, nectarines or prunes, and Robin always

managed to save enough from her ravenous household to fill a jar or two or a half-dozen jelly glasses toward her winter store. All summer, even while she was at Twenty Rattles, this providing for the winter had been occupying spare minutes of her time.

On one fine October day, Jerry and Maggie went nutting, and brought home a sack full of hazel and pine nuts, which were spread on the attic floor to dry and sweeten. And a week later, on Robin's birthday, as it pleasantly happened, came a delightful surprise in the shape of a barrel of beautiful winter apples from the old home orchard in Summerville, sent by unforgetting and unforgotten friends in that dear, far-away village of their birth.

Oliver Twist, who had grown into a fine fat pig, had long since been pronounced a superfluous member of the community, and now poor Jerry had to consent to his being traded to the Angel Flat butcher for a good supply of lard, ham, bacon and corned beef. Oliver departed in the butcher's wagon, grunting cheerfully, with the bedraggled remnants of a red ribbon bow still adorning his collar, while Jerry tried to console himself with the affable butcher's assurance that the pig should enjoy another year of existence, in a comfortable pen, before he met the inevitable fate of his kind.

One thing more than any other troubled Don and Robin now. It was almost time for the herders from "below" to come up for their cattle, and, of

course, Windfall, with her now fully recovered calf, must be set free. How they should miss her invaluable contributions to their table! Robin grew more parsimonious every day with her cream, saving every spoonful she could to make butter. Don tried to plan some economy by which they could afford to buy a cow when Windfall had gone, but he came to the regretful conclusion that it wouldn't do. Their little fund was considerably depleted by the necessary expenditures for supplies, and for the trees and vines they had set out. And it seemed to Don quite important to keep a little reserve fund, not to be touched except in case of sickness or emergency.

"So I'm afraid we'll have to put up with condensed milk this winter," Don told his sister, "and we must make every pint go as far as possible. Maybe, if everything goes well through the winter, and Jerry and I succeed in getting something to do till spring at the mine, we can afford to get a cow then."

"You're right, of course, Don. You always are," agreed Robin. But she sighed as she added: "And we'd better order a case of the evaporated cream at once, so as to be prepared when we have to let Windfall go."

Fortunately, however, Don delayed doing as she suggested. Fortunately, because, late one afternoon, about a week after this conversation, a stranger appeared at the door of the Robin's Nest,

and asked civilly if he might have some supper and a night's lodging. Don replied that he could, if he didn't mind bunking with either Jerry or himself. One of the boys could sleep in the hammock in the living-room. The stranger declared that anything would suit him — all he cared about was something to eat and a shelter for himself and his horse. He had come up to gather in his herd of cattle that had been ranging the mountains all summer. He had not yet overtaken them, and had concluded to stop over night at some ranch and push on farther next morning.

Of course the story of Windfall and her calf was told him then, and the young people were much interested, if a little regretful, when he declared his willingness to eat his boot if they didn't prove to be part of his bunch. Don, mindful of the fact that they knew nothing of the stranger's reliability, though he looked honest and respectable enough, asked him to describe his cow and calf, and this the man did so accurately that no doubt was left as to the identity of his animals with the ones they had harbored all summer.

Robin's heart sank at the prospect of so soon giving up the cow. She had hoped it would be a few days longer before the régime of the despised "canned milk" began again.

The visitor proved to be a pleasant, chatty fellow, not especially cultivated, but with shrewd, common sense, a dry humor of his own, and considerable

experience in certain interesting phases of western life. A guest was something so unusual at the Robin's Nest as to seem quite an event, and the entire party sat up late that evening, visiting by the fire.

The next morning, after a good breakfast, the stranger saddled his horse and said good-by to his entertainers. As he expected to return to Minersville by another road, he had decided to take the cow and calf with him, and Windfall was tugging at the end of a rope tied to the saddle-pommel, while the calf wandered about, keeping an eye on his mother, and evidently wondering what was going to happen.

"Well, how much do I owe you for my board and lodgin'?" asked Windfall's owner, before gathering up his reins; but Don shook his head decidedly.

"I guess your little Jersey has paid your debt a good many times over. We're only glad you happened along so that we could thank you, and apologize if we've been too high-handed in taking possession of her."

"I'm the one to do the thankin', I reckon," replied the other, with his hand on his horse's mane. "She's in fust-rate shape, and her calf, too, as would have been clean loss to me if you hadn't saved its life. I've been thinkin' mebby I ought to make you some recompense fer doctorin' him up."

"We were glad to do it," Robin protested, and Don added:—

"All we ask is that if by next spring you want to sell Windfall you give us the first chance to buy her."

"Why, I'll sell her now, if you want to buy her," said Windfall's owner, and he named a price.

But Don shook his head regretfully. "Sorry, but we haven't got that much money to spare just now. Next spring, maybe."

"Tell you what," said the stranger, suddenly, "if you want the cow, I'd a heap rather sell her now than to wait six or eight months. You saved the calf for me, and he's worth a good twenty dollars. I could get that for him any day in town. So if you want his ma, I'm willin' to let her go for the price I stated, less the twenty dollars you saved me. It's a bargain for you, but I reckon, under the circumstances, that it's square all round."

This offer was too liberal to be refused, and moreover, the reduction of twenty dollars from the price of the cow brought her safely within their reach. Rejoicing in this unexpected turn of affairs, Don concluded the bargain at once, and wrote a check on the Minersville bank for the price of Windfall. Master Calf, plump and frisky and rebelliously bleating, was led away by the rope which had been transferred from his mother's neck to his own, while the whole Robin's Nest household turned out to comfort Windfall with salt and carrots for her loss, and to assure her of their joy that she was to become a permanent member of the establishment.

"'WHY, MR. JUKES!' CRIED ROBIN, 'IS IT YOU?'"

One important task was the providing of firewood enough to last all winter, but this Don had had in mind for a long time. Every spare moment for months he and Jerry had devoted to felling trees, sawing and splitting wood, and already a goodly number of cords was growing dry and seasoned and being piled away in the little lean-to woodshed they had built back of the house. A week or two of steady work now, and they would be well provided with fuel against the cold and stormy weather.

One other pleasant task that had been occupying odd minutes of Robin's time during the late summer and fall we must not fail to record. Devoted as she was to flowers, it had occurred to her that possibly there was not only pleasure, but profit to be derived from the lovely wild blossoms with which she had become familiar during her months in the Sierras. She had watched and waited patiently as one after another of her favorites stopped blooming and went to seed, and, as soon as the process of ripening was complete, she had gathered the seeds, packing them away in carefully labeled little envelopes. When spring returned, she intended to have a wild flower garden where she could study their habits, find out which were annuals and which would not blossom until a second or third year; how much water and what kind of soil each variety required, and which, if any, blossomed most successfully under cultivation. With this information, and with as large a supply of seeds and bulbs as she could gather from

her own garden and from the great wild garden of the hills, she believed she could start a profitable little business. An old florist she knew in Summerville would be glad, she was sure, to experiment with some of these beautiful and unknown blossoms, and to call the attention of his patrons to them. Perhaps the project might ultimately be successful enough to bear enlarging. Letters could be written to other florists and seed growers in the East, and even a tiny catalogue containing lists and descriptions and prices, might not be impracticable.

This plan was only one of many that were fermenting in Robin's active brain. Another that she hoped to carry out was the raising of chickens, with the brood Larry had given her as a nucleus for the flock of a hundred or more which she felt quite capable of looking after. Don promised that he would fence in a poultry yard in the spring, and try his hand at building a chicken-house, and already his sister was happily counting her unhatched chicks.

The first rain fell in the early part of October, and wonderfully refreshing it seemed after the long weeks of sunshine. The night that the storm began, Don and Jerry lay awake a long time listening to the marching of regiments of rain-drops over the low roof, and to the soft gurgle of the water that ran from the eaves-trough down into their cistern.

"It sounds fine now, but I'll bet we'll be sick enough of it before the winter is over," commented Jerry.

"Dare say we shall," replied Don, sleepily; "but I'm not going to worry about that yet awhile. Anyway, they all say it's pleasant the biggest part of the time till February. There are only a few months when it's really very stormy. Did you think to bring in your saw to-night, Jerry?"

But Jerry, lulled by the music of the rain, was sound asleep and snoring gently.

Now that the summer tasks and pleasures were over, indoor employments came to seem of some importance once more. Not that the weather was such as to keep them indoors much of the time — far from it. Most of the days were like perfect autumn days in the East, with their blue sky and sunshine and crisp, bracing air; or else with the soft, smoky, dreamy beauty of the New England Indian summer. Many a glorious tramp was taken over the mountain-sides, where the early frosts had been at work, picking out the deciduous trees here and there among the evergreens and bidding them stand forth in golden contrast with the changeless green of fir and cedar, pine and spruce. Little clumps of poison oak glowed like tiny bonfires on the long slopes.

The trout were biting famously, and Jerry set himself the pleasant task of keeping the family larder supplied with fish. Sometimes Don would take old Jonathan Sturtevandt's rifle or his own shotgun and go out for half a day's hunting, coming home with quail or grouse or squirrels enough

for several meals. Neither of the boys cared much about killing wild creatures, but now that the butcher had given up his weekly visit, and came only at intervals of two or three weeks past the mine and the Robin's Nest, an occasional bag of game was a great help to Robin in satisfying the excellent appetites of her family. Don cherished an ungratified longing to kill a deer, but as yet he had not so much as seen a track. Mr. Forrest had assured him that there would be plenty of game later on, when the upper ranges were covered deep with snow. Even an occasional black bear or mountain lion might be looked for then, although several seasons had elapsed since either had been seen in the vicinity of Twenty Rattles and Angel Flat.

But, as has been said, indoor pursuits were now the more important. Robin's nimble fingers were hard at work getting her family "sewed up" for the winter. The pile of miscellaneous mending that had accumulated during her long absence and the first busy weeks after her return, was steadily decreased in size, day by day. A good sewing machine was rented for a week from Angel Flat, and for six long days and evenings its musical humming scarcely ceased. Maggie did the cooking and Jerry helped her with the housework, while Robin devoted her whole attention to her sewing. Maggie's scanty wardrobe was put into neater order than it had ever known before, and increased by the addition of one or two new frocks, cut over from old ones of Robin's.

Very few new things were bought for any of the family, but, with a great deal of judicious mending, turning and making over, the whole household was made very respectable and comfortable, if neither fashionable nor elegant.

Many little postponed improvements were made in the interior of the house. Sash curtains were provided for the living-room windows, sofa pillows were freshened by new covers, and the hammock, which had swung all summer on the porch, was brought in again and hung in its corner. On the floor a beautiful scarlet and black Navajo blanket added a glowing touch of warmth and cosiness to the room. This was a loan from John Forrest, who had brought it over one day and begged them to make use of it, arguing that he had no place for it in his own narrow quarters, and would see it oftener and enjoy it more at the Robin's Nest than he did while it was packed away in moth balls at the bottom of his trunk.

The boys' den was rendered more attractive by a dozen little touches of feminine ingenuity, and a little drum stove was set up to keep it cosily warm.

One thing there was that Robin now insisted upon, and her brothers yielded to her wishes, Don gracefully, but Jerry with more or less grumbling. A stack of long-neglected school books was to be taken down from its shelf, regular study hours instituted, and the boys' education resumed in earnest after the long vacation from lessons.

Robin's own college career had been cut short by their father's illness and death, but she still had enough years' advantage in schooling over her brothers to be of great help to them in their studies. She and Don tackled Virgil together now, and while he struggled with constructions and meters, his sister, to whom it was all familiar and easy, amused herself by translating the beautiful Latin poetry into English verse.

French and German the whole family studied together by the conversational method, getting considerable fun as well as profit out of their halting interchange of trite and uninteresting remarks. Jerry always held the dictionary at such times to look up doubtful or disputed words, while Don and his open grammar were looked to when a difficult question of construction arose.

The classes in literature and history were the most interesting of all, and this is how they were conducted. After supper, the young people would gather around the lamp in the living-room, and one of them, oftenest Don, would read aloud from some classic of literature or some standard work of history, while Robin sewed, Maggie knitted briskly in the funny German fashion her grandfather had taught her, and Jerry looked to the mending of the fire and keeping the hearth clear of falling ashes. Any one was allowed to interrupt the reader on these occasions with questions or comments not irrelevant to the subject under consideration, and often it

"'GOLD! GOLD! GOLD!' HE BREATHED EXULTANTLY IN HER EAR."

happened that the book was laid aside altogether in favor of some eager debate or lively discussion.

Of the books their father had left, only a few had been brought with the Arnolds to California, but that few Robin had chosen carefully, knowing, as she did, that their new home would lie far away from book shops and libraries.

Maggie's schooling had been, as may be imagined, sadly neglected. The school of the district was located several miles from the Sturtevandt ranch; her grandfather had never insisted on her attending it, and as for herself, she had always preferred roaming the mountains, like a little wild creature, to staying indoors and studying stupid books. Now, however, her active brain found in them a new and lively interest. She learned eagerly and quickly all that Don and Robin could find time to teach her, and it was not long before Jerry discovered that he must be getting to work in earnest or his playmate would be outstripping him in many of the branches both were studying. The friendly rivalry between him and Maggie had an excellent effect on the scholarship of both children, and Robin took pains to encourage it.

Often, as the evenings grew longer and frostier, John Forrest and Trump would stroll over to spend an hour or two by the Robin's Nest fireside. It was on one of these occasions that the engineer suggested modestly that he would be delighted to accept a position on the faculty of the Robin's Nest Univer-

sity, were such a position tendered him—which it was, promptly. After that, he used to come regularly, twice a week, with a book or two under his arm, prepared to listen to a recitation in mathematics or deliver a lecture on geology or mineralogy. Although the girls were interested in these subjects, it was Don and Jerry who took them up with the greatest enthusiasm. Jerry developed an especial passion for geology, and the mantel shelf fairly sagged under the weight of his rapidly accumulating specimens.

"Next year we'll build a museum and laboratory," Don declared ambitiously. "Then we can put in the whole winter studying all these things in earnest. I'd like to try my hand at chemistry and assaying, wouldn't you, Jerry?"

"Yes, but I'd take the outdoor part of it if I had to choose. I can't decide whether I'll be a civil engineer and build railroads or a prospector and locate gold mines."

"And mica ledges?" suggested Mr. Forrest, to Jerry's confusion.

Thus, very pleasantly, though uneventfully, the autumn passed. Jerry continued to go thrice weekly to Angel Flat for the Twenty Rattles' mail. Maggie and Robin kept busy and happy about the house. Don, while waiting for the position that Mr. Abbott hoped to have for him at the mine a little later, devoted himself to his studies, to the increasing of his wood pile, and to some necessary bits of carpentering and tinkering about the house.

It was drawing very near to a season dear to all New England's children — in other words, it lacked but a fortnight of Thanksgiving Day, when the monotony of life at the Robin's Nest was broken in upon by a happening so exciting as to deserve a chapter to itself.

CHAPTER XXI

LARRY ENTERS THE ROBIN'S NEST

DON and Jerry were away from home, having left early in the morning for an all-day hunt. Maggie was perched like a little brown bird in a crotch of a great spreading oak, not far from the Robin's Nest, lost to the world; for she had found a ragged old copy of "Eight Cousins" among Robin's books, and was reading it for the first time.

Robin was herefore alone in the house, and was taking advantage of the unusual quiet and leisure to answer some long-neglected letters. The day was warm and sunny, so that the fires had been allowed to go out, and the doors stood hospitably open. It was getting well toward sunset, and Robin was just addressing and sealing her last letter, when she was startled by a hoarse, distressed "Mee — ow!" at her side. Looking down, she discovered Tom Quartz sitting by her chair.

"Why, Tommy, old fellow! Where did you come from?" she asked in surprise; for neither Tom nor his master had been at the Robin's Nest for many months, and Robin had regretfully given up all hope that the mysterious breach between them and their old neighbor would ever be healed.

"Mee — ow!" wheezed Tom Quartz, staring at her fixedly with his yellow eyes.

Robin patted her knee invitingly, but he would not jump to it, and when she leaned over to pick him up he eluded her hand and started slowly toward the open door, mewing mournfully.

"If it were Trump I should know he wanted me to go with him," she said to herself; "but of course a cat wouldn't have so much intelligence as that!"

"Mee — ow! Meeee — ooow!" howled Tom, at the door, and Robin, smiling at her own absurdity, jumped up and followed him.

That Tom had come to the Robin's Nest with any deliberate intention of finding her, or was leaving it with the idea of inducing her to follow him, is, perhaps, improbable. As events proved, however, the chance visit was a most timely one. For Tom, stopping now and then to sniff at something in the grass or to watch with cruelly dilating eyes some darting little lizard, led the way, by slow stages, back from the Robin's Nest and up along the spring brook to the edge of the woods. Here he paused, looked back at her, mewed, and went on into the underbrush.

"Of course it's a wild goose chase, but I do mean to see where you're bound for, you silly old pussy!" said the girl, gathering up her skirts for a scramble. But before she had gone more than a few yards farther, with Tom's black and white body gliding noiselessly ahead through the bushes, she stopped suddenly, for a sound had reached her ears. It

came from out the dense thicket above her, some distance up the mountain, and it sounded like the groan of a man in pain. Though her heart thumped rather uncourageously, she pressed on through birch and manzanita, not knowing whom or what she might find. Presently there was a crackling in the brush before her, and then another groan. It sounded as if some one were painfully trying to drag himself along the ground.

"Wait a minute — I'm coming!" she called cheeringly, tearing her skirt free from a detaining brier.

"I don't want nobody. Go back!" was the startlingly savage reply that reached her, and in a familiar voice.

"Why, Mr. Jukes!" cried Robin, in astonishment, "is it you?"

She had reached him in another minute. Larry was lying on his face, one hand outstretched as if to grasp a near-by sapling with which to drag himself farther; but he had given up all effort on Robin's approach.

"What is the matter? What has happened?" cried the girl, bending over the old man with concern.

"Nothin' — 'tain't nothin' serious! Guess I've sprained my all-fired ankle — that's all. Just y'u go back an' say nothin' to nobody! I'll make out to crawl home some way."

"Mr. Jukes, do you think I'm a barbarian?" she demanded, as much disgusted as she was puzzled.

"You mustn't move another inch — not another inch, mind! Lie still till I can run and get help!"

Larry raised his head and looked at her like a hunted creature.

"Who y'u goin' to get?" he questioned fiercely.

"There isn't any one but Maggie. The boys are away, but I think we can get you down to the house. Now mind you lie still!" And Robin was off, scrambling down the mountain-side as fast as she could go.

In less than half an hour she and Maggie were back, with Stubby hitched to the little stone-boat Don had contrived for hauling wood. Blankets and pillows had been thrown hastily into this rude equipage. By breaking branches and bending saplings, Maggie and Robin succeeded in making a way for Stubby nearly to the place where Larry lay. Then they went to the old man and with the greatest difficulty managed half to support, half drag him to the stone-boat, where he sank on the blankets, his tanned face gray and drawn with pain. Slowly and carefully as possible the unique ambulance was then guided down the mountain till it stopped at the door of the Robin's Nest.

"Can't y'u take me home?" begged Larry, faintly, from the blankets.

"No, Mr. Jukes, we can't," declared Robin, losing patience, in spite of her sympathy with the poor old man. "Stubby couldn't drag you so far on this sled, and there wouldn't be any one to take care of you when you got there. You'll have to put

up with entering Uncle Jonathan's house at last. There's nothing else to be done."

Quite meekly, leaning upon a pair of old crutches that had been Johnnie Sturtevandt's, he suffered himself to be helped up the steps and over the threshold he had never meant to cross. Tom Quartz followed at his master's heels.

"We'll take him into our room, Maggie, so that he can lie down on the bed. Then you must saddle Stubby and ride up to the mine. Tell Mr. Abbott what has happened and ask him to come," planned Robin.

When their unwilling guest had been made as comfortable as possible and Maggie had departed for help, Robin went down to the bridge to watch for the boys, but a quarter of an hour passed and still there was no sign of them. The sun was behind the buttes now, and the chill of night was already in the air. Not wishing to leave her patient alone any longer, Robin went back to the house. As she entered the door she heard talking in her little bedroom, and, thinking that the boys must have come home by way of the woods and so missed her, she hurried in. But there was no one there save Tom Quartz and the white-bearded man on the bed. Larry's eyes were bright and wild. His face was so hot that it almost burned the cool hand that she laid upon it. He was talking incessantly, though most of what he said was so incoherent that she could not understand.

Feeling terribly helpless and alone, Robin did her best to quiet the old man. She bathed his face and wrists, gave him cold water to drink, fanned him, and talked to him soothingly, as if he had been a child. After a while he grew quiet and seemed to fall asleep, breathing heavily. Then Robin stole away from his side to light the lamps and rekindle the fires. She knew her brothers would be as hungry as bears when they reached home, so she started her supper, listening all the time for steps on the porch or a sound from Larry. It was the latter that she heard first. Hurrying back into the bedroom, she found Larry sitting up and looking about him.

"Where am I?" he asked quietly.

"At the Robin's Nest, quite safe," she replied, as quietly. "Lie down now and try to sleep. We'll have some one here soon."

But Larry would not lie down. His eyes roamed restlessly about the room, finally fixing themselves on her face.

"Where's Johnnie Sturtevandt? I don't see nothin' of him."

"Hush — you must go to sleep!" said Robin, laying a hand on his shoulder, which yielded not an inch to the gentle pressure she exerted. Suddenly she found her wrist caught and held as in a vise.

"I've got to kill Johnnie Sturtevandt to-night. Tell me where he is!"

Trembling inwardly, but outwardly serene, Robin

answered, not even trying to draw away her hand: —

"Better wait till to-morrow, hadn't you, Mr. Jukes? You're not feeling very well to-night, you know." Then, thinking to lead him away from the dangerous subject, she added: "Suppose you tell me how you happened to hurt yourself. Did you fall? What were you doing up in the woods?"

He looked at her in a strange, furtive way.

"That's nobody's affair but mine, I reckon," he replied. Then a thought seemed to strike him suddenly, and the grip on her wrist tightened painfully. "What did y'u see?" he demanded anxiously.

"Why, nothing at all," she answered, reassuringly. "Nothing but you and Tom Quartz and the trees and bushes."

He looked relieved, but did not let her go.

"Are you his wife?" was his next and unexpected query.

Robin was uncertain who "he" might be, but felt quite sure of her ground in replying that she was not.

"I'm Roberta Arnold. Don't you remember me? And my brothers, Don and Jerry? You're in our house. The boys will be here soon."

Still holding to her wrist, he sank back against the pillow wearily. "I don't know no Arnolds. I thought mebby y'u was the woman Johnnie married. It's been lonesome since Johnnie — left. Do — you — think — " he roused himself a little.

"Do y'u think likely he'll come back here soon, ma'am?" Without waiting for an answer, the old man rambled on, his eyes half shut, a smile on his face. "I've got somethin' great to tell Johnnie when he comes. Will he come soon, d' y'u think? I'm gettin' old, an' it's lonesome since he quit. An' my leg — it — hurts. I think — " He opened his eyes suddenly. "Lean down, Johnnie," he whispered hoarsely. "Lean down, an' I'll tell y'u!"

Frightened by his wild looks, she tried to draw her hand away, but he pulled her down till his silvery beard brushed her cheek.

"*Gold! Gold! Gold!*" he breathed exultantly in her ear.

Then, with startling suddenness, his mood changed. Sitting up again, his white hair tumbled by the pillows, his blue eyes almost black with excitement and anger, he cried aloud, as he had done in his own shack, with none but Tom Quartz to hear, nearly half a year before:—

"Curse him, I say! Curse John Sturtevandt!"

Robin could stand no more. Mustering all her strength, she tore her aching wrist from the old man's insane grasp and rushed away from him, out of the house, down the wagon track to the bridge. There she stopped to listen and to search the darkness. It seemed hours before a welcome, if unmusical, sound reached her waiting ears — the bray of delight with which Stubby always voiced his feelings when he was nearing home. Soon she saw a lantern

approaching, and began to hear voices — Maggie's and Mr. Abbott's and that of Barney O'Hara, her old Knight of the Dinner-horn.

"Oh, I'm so glad you've come!" she almost sobbed as she flew to meet them. As they all went on up to the house, she told them of Larry's delirious ravings and her own fright, but for some reason she could hardly have explained to herself, she made no reference to the strange things he had said in his delirium. In his irresponsible mental condition, she knew that the old prospector had hinted at matters whose secrecy he guarded jealously in his normal state, and it seemed hardly fair for her to repeat what she had been obliged to hear. Anyway, it threw but little light on the mystery that seemed destined to remain unsolved to the end of the chapter.

Hardly had the house been reached when a cheerful but weary war-cry from behind announced that the boys, too, were coming, and Robin turned back to meet them and tell them what had happened. They listened breathlessly, Don reproaching himself for having been away when his sister was in such need of him.

"It wasn't your fault, Don!" she protested. "You couldn't know what was going to happen. But aren't you very late? Windfall has been calling you to come and milk her this hour past."

"Wait till you see what we've got and you won't ask why we're late!" said Jerry, mysteriously.

"Only we haven't got it," corrected Don. "It's

a good five miles from here, hanging in a tree where the coyotes can't reach it, and to-morrow early we're going to take Stubby and bring it home."

"*A deer?*" asked Robin, with proper enthusiasm.

"*A deer!*" said Don.

"Poor thing!" mourned Robin. "Of course I'm glad you got it, but ——"

"That's a good deal the way Jerry and I felt," confessed Don, as the three went into the house together.

The night that followed was a busy and an anxious one. For hours Larry's terrible fever, which seemed strangely out of proportion to his injury, and to the amount of pain he was suffering, continued to rage.

"I can't understand his condition," Mr. Abbott said to Robin, frowning perplexedly. "It's as if his brain had given way under some severe strain. If he isn't better by daylight, I shall telephone to Minersville for a doctor."

But toward morning the old man's high temperature yielded a little to constant cold water bathing; his periods of raving became less violent and farther apart, and at last ceased altogether, although his mind was still clouded, so that he did not seem to recognize any of the figures that came and went about his bed. Once, when Robin came to his side, he looked up at her with a sudden, sweet smile, and called her "Mary." Robin's eyes filled with tears as she realized that for the moment she was doubt-

less embodying to the lonely old man some memory of his far-away youth.

About two o'clock Larry fell asleep. Mr. Abbott went back to Twenty Rattles for the remainder of the night, promising to return immediately after breakfast; Barney stayed to watch with Larry till morning. Robin and Maggie climbed wearily upstairs to the boys' room for two or three hours' rest, while Don and Jerry camped in the living-room, one in the hammock and one on the bearskin rug, where they slept uneasily till daybreak.

CHAPTER XXII

A MYSTERY EXPLAINED

It was the evening before Thanksgiving Day. Larry was well enough now to sit up in the big chair before the fire, with his injured foot carefully propped up among cushions and rugs. The fever which had burned in his blood for several days after the accident, had left him pale and thin. He looked a dozen years older than he had done when the Arnolds first saw him, and in other ways as well he seemed much altered. All the old irascibility and uncertainty of temper had left him, and a gentle, settled sadness had come to be his habitual mood. He would lie on his bed or sit in his chair for hours, hardly saying a word, but following with his eyes Robin's brisk movements as she went about her household duties.

The care of the old man had, of course, been a good deal of a burden, and it had necessitated Don's and Jerry's giving up their room temporarily to their sister and cousin. Mr. Abbott had had a cot brought down from the mine, however, and with that and the hammock, the boys' nights were passed not uncomfortably. All the young people had done their best to make their patient feel that he was

welcome. Even Jerry had resolved to let bygones be bygones, and had been as kind and cordial to Larry as if nothing had ever happened between them.

A protracted storm had kept everybody indoors for several days, and on the evening of our present chapter the rain still pattered steadily on roof and window-pane, making the warm, lamp-lighted cosiness of the sitting-room pleasanter than ever by force of contrast. Robin's fingers were busy, as usual, with some bit of needle work. Don and Jerry were sitting on the floor, as close as possible to the glowing hearth, busily engaged in renewing their stock of bullets. Maggie occupied a low stool near them, looking on with interest as Don poured the silvery liquid lead from his ladle into the mold which Jerry held. Tom Quartz lay on his master's lap, purring contentedly. Tom had taken the changed conditions of his life very philosophically, and except for an occasional excursion to the deserted cabin where he and Larry had lived so long, he had stayed close about the Robin's Nest.

Everything seemed so peaceful, serene, and usual on this Thanksgiving eve, that it was as startling as a clap of thunder would have been to hear Larry Jukes cry suddenly, in choked, unnatural tones: —

"I've got to do it! I've got to do it! I can't go on this here way no longer! I'm goin' to tell y'u everythin' an' then y'u can turn me outdoors if y'u want. I'll not blame y'u."

They stared at him in amazement, Robin with her needle in the air; Don with the lead cooling in his uplifted ladle.

"Why, Mr. Jukes," said Robin, soothingly, wondering if the fever had returned and Larry were raving again, "you can tell us anything you want to, of course; but don't talk of such a silly thing as our turning you out of doors!"

"I should say not!" agreed Don.

"Wait till I tell y'u!" said Larry, holding up his hand for attention. They waited, but for many minutes Larry said no word. He was staring moodily into the fire, trying, perhaps, to find the words he needed to make the revelation he had decided to make. At last he turned to Jerry.

"It's a bad night, lad, but I've somethin' for y'u to do. Will y'u go through the dark to my shack an' bring me somethin' what's there?"

Robin opened her mouth to protest, but Jerry was already on his feet and had started for his cap and rubber boots and lantern. What weighed a tramp and a drenching in the balance with the solution of the great mystery?

"There's a loose stone in the hearth to my fireplace," Larry directed. "It's near the outside edge, at the end nearest the bunk. Underneath it is a box, an' it's inside that that y'u'll find what I want y'u to bring."

"Yes, sir! I'll be back in half an hour," declared Jerry, as the door slammed between him and the

group he was leaving. They could hear the splash of his feet in the flooded wagon track as he ran down toward the bridge.

After his departure, neither Larry nor the others spoke. All were waiting, Larry grimly, the others with suppressed excitement. Robin laid aside her sewing and went to the window to watch for her brother's returning lantern. Tom Quartz, ignorant of the dramatic turn affairs had taken, purred himself fast asleep on his master's knee. Maggie had taken Jerry's place by the hearth, and was holding the mold while Don finished his run of bullets.

True to his word, Jerry was back in half an hour. That he had run much of the way was evident enough as he burst into the room, panting for breath, with mud splashed to his shoulders, his dark eyes blazing with excitement and his wet hair plastered in disorder to his forehead.

"Here 'tis!" he cried breathlessly, tossing a little canvas sack of something heavier than salt or meal on the table by Larry's side. "Now we're ready for the story, Mr. Jukes." He threw aside his wet coat and cap, and sat down on the bearskin by the fire, looking up eagerly into the old man's face.

"It's got to do with y'ur uncle, Jonathan Sturtevandt," said Larry, after a little. He had turned to Robin, and it was apparently more to her than to the others that he spoke as he told the story that follows.

"We'd guessed that much!" said Jerry, but Larry did not heed the interruption.

"It's more'n forty years ago I first saw Johnnie Sturtevandt," Larry went on. "It's nearer fifty, I reckon. Things was wild enough up in these mountains then. I'd been round this here region quite a spell when Johnnie showed up. He was a good-lookin' young feller — snappin' black eyes an' a heavy black beard. 'Cept for the beard he looked like Jerry here does. I noticed the likeness the day I brung y'u up. Johnnie hadn't no friends, an' as he had just come from back East, he didn't know any too much, but some way I took a notion to him right off. We wasn't far from an age. He hadn't no pardner, an' mine had got himself shot a while before, so he an' I agreed we'd go in together. We stayed by each other for somethin' like ten years, an' all that time there wa'n't never a mean thought nor a hard word between me an' Johnnie. We warmed by the same fire, an' slep' in the same blankets, day after day an' night after night, an' when either one of us made a strike, the other always got his half o' the dirt, or o' the bacon an' beans it bought. One year there was a 'Frisco man grubstaked us an' sent us way back into the range, where nobody ever went those days. We packed our stuff on a couple o' burros, an' for months an' months we never saw a man's face, except each other's. An' we wa'n't lonesome, neither. Sometimes we'd sing songs an' tell stories half a night by

our camp-fire, an' sometimes we'd set around an' say nary a word but yes or no. But either way we wa'n't never lonesome. It's that way when men are friends.

"Wall, it was after we'd drifted into this here district — 'twas a big placer camp then, where Twenty Rattles is now — that Johnnie quit me. He'd went to 'Frisco with some dust we'd been collectin' for a good many weeks, an' he didn't come back. I got a package an' letter from him — my share o' the money our dust had brought an' the news that he'd found a woman he liked an' he was goin' to get married an' stay in 'Frisco.

"After that I never had no pardner — not till I got Tom Quartz here. I felt lonesome about startin' off to any new camp by myself, so I sort o' squatted here, an' here I've been ever since. When Twenty Rattles opened up I got a job o' prospectin' an' samplin' ore dumps for them, an' I've worked there, off an' on, at one thing or another, ever since.

"I hain't been very ambitious, I suppose; but I haven't had no one to work for — that makes a difference. It sort o' took the life out o' me when my pardner quit."

"But you couldn't blame Uncle Jonathan for wanting to marry and have a home of his own," protested Don. "I should think you'd have wanted to do the same."

The old man shook his head, and a shade of deep sadness passed over the sternly set face.

"I'd done with that sort o' thing long before I ever set eyes on your uncle. There's a grave, 'way down in the old San Joaquin valley, where the only woman I ever wanted went to dust more'n half a century ago. I think about her sometimes, when I'm singin' that there song I sang for y'u when we was comin' up from Minersville: —

"'We are wreck an' stray,
We are cast away,
Poor battered old hulks an' spars;
But we hope an' pray
On the judgment day
We shall strike it up in the stars.'

"But Mary ain't got nothin' to do with the story I'm tellin' y'u; save only that as I get older, I think more about it — that mebby what Preacher Pearce comes up to tell us mountain folks has got some truth in it, an' mebby I'll see her again some day. An' I know — I've knowed for quite a spell, that I could never look her in the face if I was to die without tryin' to make up for what I've done to y'u."

"But what is it you've done to us? We don't understand. Please explain!" begged Robin.

And Larry went on with his story.

"Some nine or ten years ago — I was livin' then where I do now, an' workin' at Twenty Rattles when I saw fit — I went out one day with my gun to see if I couldn't kill a grouse for my dinner. I clumb part way up the mountain, back of my cabin,

an' then I wandered down in this direction till I was just about even with where your garden is, an' 'bout quarter of a mile above it. Y'u know it's pretty much all brush an' briers up there, an' there's a little waterfall where the spring brook takes a jump over the rocks. The man who'd taken out the place as a homestead claim hadn't been up here for years. He'd proved it up, so we understood, an' then sold it, an' some way or other it had come into the hands of a doctor back East somewheres. The house stood empty, an' there didn't nobody live any nearer it than Twenty Rattles, except me.

"Wall, I was pokin' around, lookin' for game, when I come to that there brook o' yours, about fifty feet below the falls, an' at a place where it widens out into a little pool with sandy edges an' lots o' stones an' gravel. Mebby y'u know the place, but likelier y'u don't, for it's awful rough to get to, an' y'u'd never guess there was anythin' wuth while when y'u did get there. I never thought o' findin' anythin', but just because prospectin' is second nature to me, I dropped down on my knees in that gravel an' went nosin' around for a prospect. An' I found one! Why, that there gravel was just chock-full o' fine grains o' gold. I could see 'em without pannin'. I forgot all about grouse, an' my gun lay just where I'd dropped it, while I put for home with my pockets full o' the stuff. When I'd got to my cabin I bolted my door an' went to work, an' if I didn't take ten dollars worth o' gold out o'

the little mess o' sand an' gravel I'd packed home, I'll eat Tom Quartz!

"Then I was crazy! I asked for a two weeks' lay-off from work, an' I sneaked over here every day through the woods, with my pan an' a bottle to carry home the clean-up in. O' course I didn't say nothin' to nobody. There was only one person in the world that I wanted to tell, an' that was Johnnie Sturtevandt, my old pal; but I'd lost all track o' him — hadn't heard o' him for years an' years. So I just went on workin' my prospect on the sly, an' keepin' the gold I got in a safe hidin' place under my hearth. After the two weeks was up, I went back to the mine to work, an' just put in odd spells an' Sundays at the brook."

"Why didn't you stake out a claim and work openly?" asked Jerry.

"Because I'd no business to be workin' there at all. I was prospectin' ground that belonged to another man — to y'ur father, as I know now. Of course it was stealin'. I never pertended it was anythin' else. But I'd lived here in these hills an' worked over 'em so many years that I s'pose I couldn't just realize that it wa'n't all free ground, like it had been in the good old days. I'm not tryin' to justify myself, y'u understand?" He had turned to Jerry to answer the boy's question, but now he fixed his troubled eyes again on Robin's face.

"Yes, we understand!" said the girl, very gently. "Please go on, Mr. Jukes."

Larry hesitated a minute. "The rest ain't so easy to tell. I'm likely to fergit myself when I recall some things that's passed; but I'll try to be — to be fair an' to give y'u the story straight.

"When I heard that Johnnie Sturtevandt had come back an' was livin' with a little orphant gran'-child over here to this place, I began to think life was a pretty good thing after all. I quit right in the middle of a job I was on at Twenty Rattles, an' come down here fast as I could foot it to see my old pal. I had so much to say an' so much to ask him that I tried all the way over to think what I'd say or ask first; but when I got here, an' had holt o' his hand, I couldn't do nothin' but shake it an' shake it, an' cry like I hadn't since I was a kid.

"He'd not changed so but I'd 'a' knowed him anywheres; but he'd grown pretty gray an' he had a sad, discouraged look that wa'n't there when we was young together.

"'Hain't life been very good to y'u, Johnnie?' I asked him, an' then we sat down an' he told me all that had happened to him since he quit me. He'd had almighty hard luck, an' I guess it had soured him some. He'd lost his wife, early, an' then, when he'd brought up best way he could a mess o' motherless children, they'd all died too, till the only person he had left in the world was little Maggie here, the child o' his oldest son, who was killed, an' his wife with him, in a dynamite explosion at the old Red Flag Mine, down in Calaveras County. Besides all

this, Johnnie'd had bad luck in business. He'd never made much money, an' what he had made he'd lost, an' now he was gettin' old, an' had rheumatism pretty bad, an' nothin' to keep him. He'd got a roof to cover him, thanks to some relative back East, an' he might be able to do a little work, odd jobs now an' then. But that was about all. I could see that what worried him worst was what would become o' the little girl when he had to pull up his stakes an' move on.

"Wall, can't y'u see how good I felt, knowin' about the sack o' gold dust I had, stored away safe an' sound under my hearth? Johnnie an' me had always shared each other's luck, an' I never even thought o' not sharin' this.

" 'Johnnie,' says I, 'don't y'u say another word, but set here where y'u be till I get back!' An' then I left him an' went back to my cabin, an' came here again with my sack o' gold.

"Johnnie was sittin' where I'd left him, an' the little girl was playin' in the corner with some acorn cups I'd brung her when I first come over."

"I remember it — I remember it!" cried Maggie, suddenly. "I'd forgot before!"

"I pulled up a chair by Johnnie's," Larry went on, "an' I spread a paper on it, an' then I told him to look. An' I poured out all the gold dust I'd gathered, in a heap on the paper. There was five or six hundred dollars' worth.

"'It's half mine an' half y'urs, Johnnie, old friend!' I cried.

"Johnnie stared at it like he'd never seen any gold before.

" 'Where'd y'u get it?' he asked, pretty soon.

"An' I told him — great fool that I was! I never even thought o' swearin' him to secrecy. He was my old pardner, an' I trusted him like I would myself.

"When he heard that I'd got the gold off the ranch he was livin' on, his face sort o' changed, so't I wouldn't have knowed him any more. He bent over an' put his arms around the little heap o' gold, like he loved it, an' was afraid it would get away. I'd seen men act like that before, but I didn't know it was in Johnnie to. It's a disease, I reckon. An' he'd had tough luck. Someway, I can see things a little different to-night, now I'm talking out like I never expected to do.

" 'You've no right to this!' he said, an' if he'd knifed me, it wouldn't 'a' hurt more, comin' from him. 'This belongs to my nephew, who owns this property. I'll write an' tell him o' your discovery, an' I dare say he'll allow you a liberal commission.'

"An' all the time I knowed he was lyin', an' he knowed I knowed it. He wanted the dirt for himself — an' maybe for the child. I want to be fair.

" 'Commission nothin'!' I cried, mighty hot. 'I'll take it back where I found it, an' scatter it to the winds first!' An' then I reached for the sack I'd brung it in.

" 'If y'u take away an ounce o' this gold, I'll have y'u prosecuted for minin' my nephew's property,' he said, cold an' hateful. An' I knowed he could do it. He'd more eddication than I had, an' knowed a good deal about law an' courts.

"Then all the love I had for that man turned into burnin' hate. Everything got red in front o' my eyes, an' I felt in my clothes for somethin' to kill him with, an' I found my prospectin' hammer. I was stronger than Johnnie, an' he wa'n't armed. But all of a sudden, it come over me, like things do, about one time, up in the range, when I'd got mountain fever an' he'd sat up night after night to nurse me, an' saved my life. An' then I heard the little girl screamin', 'Gran'pa! Gran'pa!'

"I put the hammer back into my clothes an' went out of the house an' home again. There everythin' was, just like I'd left it when I come back an' got the gold. The loose stone was layin' on top the hearth, an' I remember the first thing I done was to put it back in its place.

"An' that's the end o' that part o' the story. I never spoke to Jonathan Sturtevandt again."

CHAPTER XXIII

A HAPPY ENDING TO A SORROWFUL TALE

"AFTER that," continued Larry Jukes, "I'd just one idea left in life. I wanted to fill the hole under my loose brick with another sack o' yellow dust. It wa'n't that I needed money. It was just bitterness, I reckon.

"I knew Johnnie was huntin' for my diggins, but he never found 'em. He got so bad with his rheumatism that he couldn't climb around like he did once. Anyway, he fooled away his time down at the river bed. I hadn't happened to say *where* on the ranch I'd found the gold, an' I suppose he thought the river was the likeliest spot. I never went near his house again while he was alive. But nights I'd take my pan an' lantern, an' go along the mountain through the woods till I come to the place where I'd made my strike. I'd got the easiest half out already, an' it's taken several years to fill the sack Jerry brung over to-night, as full as the one that John Sturtevandt kept. Often there'd be months I wouldn't go near the place; an' since y'u have been here I've had less chance than ever to work, for I was always afraid some o' y'u would find me out,

an' I only dared go over once in a while for a half-hour or so. There's where I'd been the day I fell over a log an' hurt myself. I was tryin' to crawl away from my pick an' pan when y'u found me an' brung me here."

Larry stopped, as if the story were now quite finished. He stroked Tom Quartz absently, and gazed with somber eyes into the dying coals of the fire that the boys had quite forgotten to replenish. Every one was looking at him questioningly, waiting for something more. After a long silence, during which a great deal of thinking and speculating was being done, Robin spoke.

"There's one thing I'd like to ask," she said. "Why have you told us all this?"

Larry roused himself.

"Do y'u know what it is to have a battle ragin' inside o' your brain for more than six mortal months?" he asked, with something of the hunted, desperate look in his face that Robin had seen there the night of his delirium. "That's what's been happenin' to me ever since y'u came up here an' treated me so kind an' friendly, an' wanted to neighbor with me. I've been thinkin', day an' night, 'It's them I'm robbin' of what belongs to 'em!' Before, I'd knowed it was somebody else's property I was takin', but the owner wa'n't even a name to me, an' I'd reasoned that he'd probably never have found what I'd found, anyways, so he wa'n't any poorer for me bein' a little richer. An' after Johnnie had went back on

me, I was so full o' hate an' bitterness I didn't care for nothin'.

"But when I saw you, Miss Arnold, slavin', up to Twenty Rattles, to earn a little money, an' when I saw what hard times y'u was goin' to have to get along, I began to feel mean as a rattlesnake. I tried long ago to get up my nerve to tell y'u, but I never could do it, nor make up my mind to quit till I'd got every grain o' gold out o' that brook bed. An' like enough I'd never have told nor quit if it hadn't been for my gettin' hurt an' bein' sick, an' y'u bein' so good to me, one an' all. I couldn't stand it no longer, so I've told. Y'u can do what y'u please about it. I don't much care what becomes o' me, only I can't stay around here when everybody knows about this. I'll be well enough to tramp pretty soon, an' then Tom an' me'll light out an' bother y'u no more. I guess mebby there's enough in that there little sack to pay for the trouble y'u've been put to, an' mebby ——"

"*Mr. Jukes!*" cried Robin; and when he looked at her he saw that the tears were rolling down her cheeks. "Of course you're not going away! And of course no one but ourselves shall ever know a word about the gold except that you found and brought it to us! Tell him so, boys — why don't you tell him so?"

"I don't deserve it!" protested Larry, faintly. "I didn't know folks could be so — so ——" His voice broke. Don and Jerry were shaking his

hands with almost painful cordiality, and Robin was smiling down into his perturbed face, trying her best not to cry from sheer pity for the poor old man.

No one had noticed that Maggie had stolen away from the group until she burst upon them suddenly from the stairway that led to the boys' den and the unfinished lumber room behind it, commonly called the "attic." Her eyes were wild with excitement, and in her hands she carried something old and dusty and gray with cobwebs — a counterpart of the canvas sack that Jerry had brought that night from Larry's cabin, and filled, like the other, with something heavy.

"Look — look!" she cried to Larry and to her astonished cousins.

For a few minutes they could get nothing coherent out of her, so great was her excitement; but presently she grew calm enough to explain herself, and this, in substance, is the tale she told.

Larry's story, from the point where he came to the house to see her grandfather, had been awakening long-dormant memories in the child's mind. While he had gone on with the relation of his own actions after the rupture between himself and his old partner, Maggie's brain had been busy trying to recall what her grandfather had done after the quarrel, and what had become of the sack of gold. It had all come back to her gradually, — how the old man had sat moodily for a long time in his chair, pay-

ing no attention to her as she played about him and dipped her little fingers into the pretty yellow sand that lay heaped on the chair beside him; how at last he had risen, gathered the gold dust again into its sack, and carried it up the stairs and into the unwindowed little attic; how, tagging at his heels, she had seen him deposit his treasure behind an old chest, far back in the dark angle formed by the sloping roof and the floor; and how, when he had found that the little girl was with him, he had cautioned her never to take the sack from its place, and how they had gone downstairs together.

From that day to this, the incident, of no great interest to a little child, had slipped from her memory. Never, until to-night, had she gone to that dark, out-of-the-way corner of the old lumber room again; but to-night, remembering everything as if it had happened a week before, she had gone straight to the spot and had found what she had seen put there long ago.

That her grandfather had not so completely neglected the place where his hoard was hidden was evident when the sack was opened, for on top of the gold dust lay a note addressed to Larry Jukes. Don, who had opened the sack, handed this to the old prospector without a word, and they all waited in almost unbearable impatience while Larry unfolded the paper with shaking hands and read its contents to himself. When he had finished reading, Larry handed the note to Don, bidding

him in a broken voice to read it aloud to the rest. Then the old man bowed his head into his hands, and slow tears trickled down through his knotty fingers as Don read in subdued tones the message from the dead. It was dated only a week before Jonathan Sturtevandt's death.

Dear Larry: Here's your gold — every ounce of it. I've tried to spend it for the child, but I couldn't. And I've tried to send it to the man back East that it rightfully belongs to, but I couldn't. I'd bring it to you to-day, but I'm too much of a coward to, even if I had the strength to crawl to your shack, which I haven't. It's been all I could do even to get up here where I've had your dust hidden all these lonesome years. For I'm dying, Larry. A few more days and you'll hear some way that I'm dead, and then Maggie will come to you and bring you this note and the gold. I don't know what's right or wrong any more. I only know that you were my partner — the best friend I ever had, and I'd like to have you think kinder of me when I'm gone than you've done lately. I'll tell Maggie about the gold before I die. Good-by, Larry. Good-by, and good luck.

"He did try to tell me — I know now what he meant!" sobbed Maggie. "He kept saying 'Larry! Larry!' over and over again, and something else, but I didn't understand — I didn't understand!"

"Never mind, Missy! It's all right now," said Larry, putting his arm about the child and drawing her close to his side. "We understand now — an' y'ur gran'pa, mebby he does, too — who knows?" His eyes were full of dreams.

"I'm sure he does!" cried Robin, wiping away her tears. "And I believe he's very happy if he knows that everything has come out right at last. We ought to be rejoicing instead of crying. Here's a

hateful mystery cleared up at last, and a little fortune waiting to be spent for the advantage of us all."

"It's y'urs — every cent of it!" declared Larry. "Y'u are y'ur father's only heirs, an' the gold is part o' his estate."

"It isn't a question of legal ownership," said Don. "It's a question of justice. You found the gold and did the hard work necessary to getting it out. Of course you shall have your share."

"When I meant to steal it all?"

"We've forgotten all about that!" said Jerry, quickly.

"I don't know what I'd use a lot o' money for," mused Larry. "I've got my little shack, an' what they pay me at the mine is more'n enough to keep me an' Tom comfortable. There's only one thing I care about, an' if y'u think it would be all right to save enough out for that, I'd be well satisfied."

"What is it?" asked Robin. "But of course it will be all right."

"When I'm through with this here old body, I'd like to think it would be taken down to the San Joaquin valley, to a place I'll tell y'u about some time, an' laid to rest beside the grave where we buried my girl, fifty years an' more ago. Would it be askin' too much for y'u to see that that's done when I'm dead?"

"It's asking very little," replied Robin. "We promise to see that that is done, don't we, boys?"

"Of course we do," agreed Don and Jerry.

"Thank y'u! That's all I can think of to ask. An' whatever else y'u think ought to come to me, I'd rather would go to Johnnie's little girl."

"It shall," said Don, quickly. "Anyway, Maggie's to be our sister for the rest of her life, so she comes in as much as we do on anything we have."

"How much is there all together in the two sacks, Mr. Jukes?" asked Jerry.

"Somewhere between a thousand an' twelve hundred dollars, I reckon," said Larry. "Not a big fortune, but enough to help y'u get a start."

"It means education for you, Don, and for Jerry and Maggie!" cried Robin. "That's the very best investment we could make of it — I know father would say so if he were here. Of course it won't be enough alone, but we've got our start here without it now, and we can put it all at interest and work hard to save more to go with it. Oh, I'm so thankful, so thankful!"

"And to-morrow's Thanksgiving Day!" said Jerry, more seriously than his wont. "We *have* a good deal to be thankful for, haven't we?"

"None so much as I," said Larry Jukes. "For I've got a clean conscience for the first time in years, an' what's more, I've got back something I thought I'd lost forever."

"Not the sack of gold dust?" queried Jerry, doubtfully.

"I know," said Don, very soberly. "It's your love for your old friend and his for you."

"That's it, lad," said Larry. "He's dead — Johnnie is; but death ain't no such separation as hatred is."

"There's something else you have — and I hope it's something to be thankful for," said Robin; and as she spoke she came to the back of the old man's chair and laid a light hand on each of his shoulders; "and that's the love of a whole houseful of new friends. They can't take the place of the old one, but they can be very true and very loving, and I think they can help to make the last years of your life a little less lonely. May they try?"

And as Larry tried to speak, but could not, Robin leaned over and kissed him on the forehead, as no woman had kissed him for more than fifty years.

CHAPTER XXIV

A CHAPTER OF SURPRISES

TRUMP and his master had been invited to the Robin's Nest for Thanksgiving dinner, and they appeared on the scene quite as soon after breakfast as was consistent with good manners. Finding the front door inhospitably shut, John Forrest strolled around the piazza to the open kitchen door, where he stood enjoying the lively scene within for several minutes undiscovered.

Robin and Maggie were bustling about, getting everything in readiness for the approaching feast; Jerry, with a big blue gingham apron tied around his neck, was paring potatoes; Don was at the sink, chopping to pieces a hard-shelled Hubbard squash with his hatchet; Larry Jukes was sitting in his arm-chair by the stove, peacefully popping corn; Tom Quartz was under everybody's feet, unreasonably growling and spitting whenever a skirt brushed against him or a foot trod ever so lightly on his tail.

The air was deliciously suggestive of the fact that this was the last Thursday in November. A heap of spicy golden cookies, just out of the oven, lay

cooling on a fresh towel on the little side table; a basin of crimson cranberries bubbled away cheerfully on top of the stove, and a half open cupboard door revealed a row of mince pies, brown and flaky and tempting almost beyond belief, with a magnificent fern leaf slashed in the top of every one by Jerry's artistic hand.

The dining table had been carried into the sitting-room for this festal occasion, and was already laid for dinner, looking so dainty and elegant, with its snowy cloth and napkins, its vase of late chrysanthemums from Robin's autumn garden, and with the silver coffee urn that had been Great-grandmother Sturtevandt's, shining resplendently among the tea cups and saucers, that Maggie could not refrain from furtive peeps through the crack of the door every five minutes.

Mr. Forrest coughed apologetically.

"Good morning! I'm afraid I've come too early, but I couldn't seem to stay away."

They all looked up from their occupations to find him smiling down upon them from the doorway.

"Good morning!" cried everybody, and then Robin added severely:—

"But you *have* come too early. It's only eleven, and you weren't invited till one; and, moreover, there isn't room in this kitchen for another person, to say nothing of a dog."

"Shall I go back?" he inquired meekly.

"Well," relenting a little, "now that you're here,

you might as well stay, but you'll have to be put to work if you do!"

"Thank you, kind lady," murmured the newcomer, humbly. "And please, what am I to do?"

"Let me see," frowned Robin. "I guess you can crack those hazel nuts first. You'll find a hammer and a broken flat-iron on the shelf above the sink. We haven't a nut-cracker. And when that's done, you can shell some more corn for Uncle Larry's popper."

"That's the way we get treated all the time, Mr. Forrest," grumbled Jerry. "She routed Don and me out of bed and made us pitch in before daylight this morning — honest she did!"

"Hard lines, Jerry! My heart aches for you," replied Forrest, cheerfully, putting down the basket he carried and helping himself to a cookie. "By the way, Miss Robin, there's something for you in this basket. It's a present from Twenty Rattles. You see everybody is going to be away to-day, except Mr. Abbott and the Smiths. Mrs. Smith is our cook, you know, of course."

"Yes, I've heard you speak of her," said Robin, "though I've been so busy I haven't found time to go up and call on my successor. How do you all like her?"

"Oh, famously! Actually, Miss Robin, we wouldn't have known that you'd left, if we'd had only the cooking to judge from."

"But what is it she's sent us?" asked Jerry,

interestedly, throwing an unfrugally thick potato paring to Trump, who caught it hopefully, but promptly spit it out in disgust.

"I'm getting to that. Don't spoil my story, Jerry. Well, Mrs. Smith didn't realize that all the men would be going over to Angel Flat or somewhere for the day, so what did she do but plan a regular down-east Thanksgiving dinner, with all the furbelows. She was genuinely disappointed when she discovered that there wasn't going to be any one there to eat it but Mr. Abbott and her husband. She'd made pies and cakes and all sorts of stuff — enough to last a week. So when I mentioned that I was coming down here to dinner, she asked me if I wouldn't like to carry a basket of the stuff she had been baking. I knew you wouldn't need it, but I didn't like to refuse, and maybe hurt her feelings, so I packed it along, and here it is."

After this long preamble, the basket was uncovered and its contents transferred to already brimming cupboard shelves. There was a beautiful cake with chocolate icing, and some of the most delectable looking doughnuts that Jerry the epicure had ever seen — so he declared. Beside the contribution from the boarding-house kitchen was a big sack of oranges and another of purple and white grapes, rich and meaty and half as large as plums, the pride of some California vineyard. The fruit was from Mr. Abbott, and a huge box of candy from San Francisco was Mr. Forrest's contribution.

"How very kind you all are!" cried Robin; and then she added regretfully: "And you say Mr. Abbott is to be all alone except for the cook and her husband? Won't he be very lonesome?"

"I suspect he will — a little. His daughter was here with him last Thanksgiving Day."

"Why didn't we invite him over here?" asked Don.

"I did think of it, but I wasn't sure that he would care to come. I wish now that I had."

"It isn't too late, Miss Robin. I'll gladly run over for you, and I know he'll be delighted to come. To be strictly honest," the speaker confessed, "I came down early especially to hint around for an invitation for my poor 'boss.' He looked so confoundedly forlorn when we were eating breakfast together this morning."

"I'll go myself!" declared Robin, remorsefully, beginning to untie her apron at once. "The turkey is all ready to go into the oven, and then there won't be anything but what Maggie can do for a couple of hours."

"At least you'll let me walk over with you?" pleaded the young man. "I really feel the need of more exercise, and it's such a lovely morning after the rain."

"Who'll crack my nuts?" objected Robin.

"I will!" volunteered Uncle Larry. "Y'u young folks just step along, an' me an' the little girl 'll see to everythin'."

"Be sure you keep Jerry and Tom out of the pantry," Robin warned them, as she rolled down her sleeves, smoothed her hair, and put on her hat.

Alone, Robin would have gone to the mine by the road — the longer and easier way; but at her companion's suggestion they took instead a well-known trail that ran rather steeply up over the shoulder of the mountain and down again on the other side to Twenty Rattles and the river. The distance by this short cut was considerably shorter than by the road, which circled around the base of the mountain, but the views from the hilltop were so beautiful and extended that it was a constant temptation to stop and gaze and take long breaths of the fresh, rain-washed air. Perhaps that accounts for the fact that it was nearly an hour from the time they left the Robin's Nest before they arrived at the mine. Mr. Abbott was sitting on his porch, reading, when they came down the trail. When Robin spoke to him he looked up with something of a start, and glanced inquiringly at Forrest, who shook his head. Robin was too intent on her errand to pay much attention to this interchange. Her tardy invitation to the superintendent was given in so cordial a way that he really couldn't have declined it had he wanted to, which was far from being the case.

"I'll be only too glad, Miss Roberta. Dinner at two, you say? I must just scratch off a letter or so, and then I'll come. Jack, suppose you run

over and tell Mrs. Smith I'll be away, before you go back."

"Let me go over with you," said Robin. "I'd like to meet Mrs. Smith and thank her for her present. Anyway," she admitted, laughing, "I'd rather like to take a peep into my old realm and see if it's as well kept as it was in my day."

"I'd like to say it isn't, but honesty compels me to prophesy that you won't find many flaws to pick in Mrs. Smith's housekeeping," replied the young man as he followed her down the trail to the boarding-house.

Everything looked quite as usual about the place. The big horn hung from its accustomed nail by the door. Over the bench, a fresh brown roller-towel fluttered pleasantly in the breeze, and the basin that hung beside it shone like a headlight in the noonday sun. The porch floors were scrubbed very white, as were the ones indoors, and the dining table was neatly set and covered with a crisp white mosquito-bar.

"I think Mrs. Smith must be in the kitchen," said Forrest. "Let's go out and investigate."

Robin preceded him through the doorway, but there she stopped short, transfixed.

A pleasant-faced, motherly-looking woman, a trifle stout and just past middle age, was sitting in a low rocker by the window. The stocking she had been darning rested idly in her white-aproned lap. Her steel-rimmed spectacles lay on the window-sill

beside her. Several little wisps of soft gray hair, straying from under her white cap, were sporting unreproved with the light wind that blew in through the frost-nipped hop vines that still shaded the open window. Mrs. Smith, lulled by the unusual quiet of the day, was sound asleep.

"It's almost too bad to disturb her," Forrest was remarking, when, to his utter bewilderment, he saw Robin spring forward and throw herself on her knees by the sleeper.

"*Chrissie! Chrissie! Chrissie!*" she was crying. "Wake up, Chrissie, and speak to your little girl!"

And Chrissie, waking with a start, and rubbing her eyes as if she must still be dreaming, realized at last that she was awake, and caught Robin to her motherly bosom.

After all, it was not half so strange as it might have been. The old housekeeper and nurse who had lived with the Arnolds since before Robin was born, had, on their removal from Summerville to New York, gone to Montana to live with a brother. They had heard from her but seldom, for writing a letter had always been far harder for Chrissie than getting up a big Christmas dinner or doing a family ironing. They had heard that she had met and married a worthy bachelor of her own age, and they had remembered that his name was Smith; but that she had left Montana after her marriage they had not known. The combination of circumstances which had brought her to Twenty Rattles was soon

explained. Her husband had worked for Mr. Abbott at some time before his marriage; and when, the preceding spring, he had been thrown out of work by the shutting down of the Montana mine where he was running a drill, he had come back to Minersville and had written to his former employer to know if there was an opening for him in the California property. He had mentioned the fact that he was married, and Mr. Abbott, receiving the letter just after his cook had left, had written at once to Henry Smith, offering him his old position at Twenty Rattles, and asking if the new wife could cook, and if she would like the vacant position at the "café." The rest of the story — how the Smiths had been delayed in Minersville by the husband's long illness, and how at last they had come up to the mine, was already known.

"What I *can't* understand is your being here nearly three months, within two miles of us, and our not dreaming of it," said Robin.

" 'Tain't so queer, come to think of it," replied Chrissie, her arm around the girl's slender waist. They were standing side by side at the window, facing Mr. Forrest, who sat on the kitchen table unreproved, enjoying their pleasure as heartily as if it had been his own. "I'd heard there was some folks from down East livin' on a farm down yonder, but, land sakes! it never crossed my mind that it was any one from old Summerville — let alone my own folks, or same as my own."

"Hadn't you ever happened to hear our names?"

"Like's not I have, but if so, it went in one ear and out the other. Arnold ain't such an uncommon name, anyways. There's folks by the name of Arnold up there in Montana where Brother Jim lives, a Jabez Arnold and his ——"

"And Don and I haven't been here once since you came, as it's happened. Jerry comes three times a week, but he just stops at Mr. Abbott's office going and coming, and always after dark, so you wouldn't have met him. Maggie came over several times with vegetables early in the fall, but of course you wouldn't have known her or she you."

"And as for their not hearing about you, Mrs. Smith," suggested John Forrest, "if Arnold isn't an uncommon name, Smith can hardly be said to be."

"No, Smith ain't uncommon; but it's a good honest name, and I'm proud to answer to it. Have you seen my husband yet, dearie?" — turning to Robin.

"Not yet," replied Robin. "Or if I ever have done so, I never guessed that he belonged to you."

Chrissie went to the door of the little room that had been Robin's for so many weeks.

"Henry! *Henry!*" she called. "Wake up and come out here! There's somebody here I want you should see. Anyway, I call it shiftless to sleep all day, if it *is* Thanksgiving Day!" The mild tones in which the rebuke was administered reminded Robin of the way Chrissie had been wont to chide

Don and Jerry for their depredations on her cooky jar in the good old days.

There was a sound of creaking springs and scraping boots, and presently Henry emerged — a tall, loose-jointed, iron-muscled westerner, with a shaggy head of hair, a lean, intelligent, smooth-shaven face, a pleasant smile and a slow, easy-going, imperturbable way about him that Robin contrasted in inward amusement with his wife's brisk, thrifty, New England ways.

"Who'd ever have thought of our spinster Chrissie marrying a wild westerner like this? But I believe I am going to like him!" Robin was thinking, as she shook hands cordially with Henry Smith.

"And now, Chrissie, you and your husband must come straight over to the Robin's Nest and eat Thanksgiving turkey with us," declared Robin. "I won't listen to an objection! I simply can't wait to see Don's and Jerry's face when they see you!"

"Bless your heart, dearie, of course we'll come. That is, if we won't be in the way, and if you will let me help about dinner."

"I'll let you do anything, Chrissie, — absolutely anything. You may even scrub my floors and wash my windows if you wish, though I'm hoping you won't think they need it. But I mustn't wait for you. I'm afraid Maggie won't remember to baste my turkey often enough, and I ought to be hurrying home."

"We'll be over as soon as Henry can shave and I can get on my other dress, child!" called Chrissie after Robin, as the latter started down the trail with Mr. Forrest. "I'd got my dinner all started, but I shall just let the fire go out under it, and come along!"

Fortunately Maggie had not forgotten to baste the turkey. That handsome bird would have been dried quite to a chip if she had, for it was long after one o'clock when Robin and John Forrest appeared at the Robin's Nest, the latter in radiant spirits, the former flushed and laughing, and apologetic for her long absence. They had found the family sitting on the porch waiting for them, for this California Thanksgiving Day was warm as summer, now that the sun was high.

Perhaps if Robin had been a degree calmer herself, she might have noticed a curious look of excitement on the four faces in front of her, but she did not.

"What made you hurry back?" asked Jerry, ironically. "Dinner won't be ready for half an hour yet."

"It's all right, Robin," comforted Maggie. "I've got the vegetables all ready to put over, and the turkey is just *bee*-eautiful!"

"Is Mr. Abbott coming?" asked Don, with an odd look at the engineer.

"Yes, indeed, and I've picked up two other guests besides, so we'll have to run in and crowd more places on the table," and Robin opened the door.

"Let's all go in and help!" cried Jerry, leaping

to his feet, and upon that every one save Larry, who could only hobble on crutches as yet, proceeded to stampede after her.

For the second time that day Robin had her breath quite taken away. She stood just inside the doorway, with an eager group around her watching the changing expressions on her face. Across one corner of the room, in a place that might have been especially designed for its occupancy, stood a beautiful little grand piano — the very one, Robin knew at a glance, that she had often looked at with covetous eyes when in Mr. Abbott's office.

"What does it mean? Where did it come from?" she faltered, turning to her older brother, as she always did when she was perplexed.

Don threw his arm around her and hugged her enthusiastically.

"Don't you understand, Sis? Mr. Abbott sent it. It's his daughter Cicely's, and you're to keep it till she comes home. Isn't it jolly?"

"Sit down and give us a 'chune,'" begged Jerry. "I've been dying to try my one-finger arrangement of 'Yankee Doodle,' but Don's a tyrant. He wouldn't let the thing be touched till you got here."

Robin turned accusingly to her escort of the morning.

"You knew about this all the time!"

"I'm afraid I can't deny it!" confessed Mr. Abbott's fellow-conspirator, not looking in the least ashamed of himself.

"And you took me by the trail instead of the road, so that we shouldn't meet the wagon bringing it over!"

"That's what I did!"

Robin sighed happily. "It's the loveliest surprise I ever had. At least it's the loveliest since — well, since this morning," she concluded mysteriously. "How about Miss Cicely — won't she mind?"

"Mr. Abbott wrote to ask her, and she wrote back that she'd be tickled to death to have you use it, or words to that effect," explained Mr. Forrest.

"Tune 'er up! Tune 'er up!" cried Jerry, impatiently. "I want to see if you've forgotten how to play."

But Robin shook her head.

"Not now, Jerry. I'm too — too rattled, as my slangy brothers would say. And I must see to my dinner now. Afterwards —" the adoring look she gave the beautiful instrument finished the sentence better than words. No one could ever know how she had missed music in this new home of theirs.

"How about that other surprise you hinted at?" asked Don, as Robin was disappearing into the kitchen.

"Go down to the bridge and wait for it — you and Jerry!" she called back over her shoulder. "It's on the way!"

The boys obeyed her bidding, though they could not imagine that anything very startling would develop. Maggie had gone to the spring brook

for water, and Uncle Larry was sitting in the big chair on the piazza, gazing dreamily up at the pine-clad slopes of the "Back Yard," and crooning softly to himself:—

"'We are wreck an' stray,
We are cast away,
Poor battered old hulks and spars —'"

But though the words were sad, there was no sadness in the old man's heart to-day, nothing but thankfulness and peace.

Everything was ready to serve at last, and Robin laid aside her apron and came back to John Forrest's side where he stood by the open door, waiting for Don and Jerry and the tardier guests.

"They're coming," he announced, smiling down at her. "Listen!"

She heard voices in conversation, drawing nearer. Mr. Abbott's low, cultivated tones and Henry Smith's good-humored drawl; Chrissie's familiar New England accent as she replied to Don's and Jerry's excited questionings. A minute more, and they would all come in sight from behind the trees.

"Oh, what a happy Thanksgiving Day!" cried Robin, softly, feeling, for very gladness, strangely close to tears.

The young man stood looking down at her still, and the smile had not faded from his lips; though the look in his gray eyes was very serious.

"An altogether blessed Thanksgiving Day!" he agreed.

CHAPTER XXV

IN THE LIGHT OF THE PITCH-PINE FIRE

THERE were so many good things to be eaten, and so many questions to be asked and answered, that the Robin's Nest party did not rise from their dinner table till nearly four o'clock.

"Now we must hurry to get things cleared away, so that we can have a good long evening together," said Robin. "If you gentlemen will be so kind as to retire to the piazza for a few ——"

"Why, we're going to help — at least I am!" declared Mr. Forrest, beginning to pile plates together with a reckless clatter.

"You'll be a great deal less help than bother," prophesied Robin, as she stood on tiptoe to tie a pair of apron strings in a big bow at the back of the young man's neck.

"Guess I'll go out and get my chores done," said Don. "I don't believe there's room enough for us all in this kitchen, anyway."

"Go along, do!" begged Robin.

"As I presume that command applies as well to the rest of us useless drones, I think we'll adopt your suggestion about the porch," said Mr. Abbott.

"Here, Henry — give me a lift, and we'll take Larry along, chair and all."

While the two girls, with Chrissie's well-directed and Mr. Forrest's well-meant efforts at assistance, were disposing of the remains of the feast and washing and putting away the dishes, Jerry put the living-room to rights, called in Henry to lend him a hand in carrying the table back to the kitchen, brushed the crumbs from the floor, and then, with a huge, well-seasoned backlog and a full basket of pitch-pine chips, proceeded to lay a fire for the evening on the broad hearth of the fireplace.

Already the sunshine had quite faded from the hilltops around the Robin's Nest valley, and the Indian summer mildness of the day had given place to the frosty chill of oncoming night.

As Robin was hanging up her big dish pan, Jerry looked in at the door to ask if he should light the lamps.

"Not just yet, Jerry," she answered him. "Let's sit in the firelight first, for a while. But don't start the fire till we're all there."

Presently they all regathered in the living-room, Don from his out-of-door duties, Robin and her helpers from an immaculate kitchen, Mr. Abbott and the old prospector and Chrissie's husband from the porch where they had been sitting. There weren't easy chairs enough to go around, but Maggie and Jerry really preferred to share with Trump the bearskin before the hearth, and Robin was tired

enough to be glad to lean luxuriously back among the hammock pillows and rest from the work and excitement and happiness of the day. Tom Quartz, full of turkey and contentment, and for once quite at peace with the world, even with Trump, purred amiably from his perch on Larry's shoulder.

"Now, Jerry, we're all here! Touch off your fire."

At Don's bidding, Jerry drew a match sputteringly across the rough stone, and touched it to a chip of pine so full of pitch that it blazed up like paper. A minute more and the wide black chimney was a-roar with leaping flames. The chill of the November night yielded to a mellow warmth and comfort. The dark shadows that had possessed themselves of the room fled to obscure corners and hid their diminished heads. From these vantage-points they tried now and then to steal forth, but only to be driven ignominiously back again by the ruddy glow that lighted the faces of the circle about the hearth, flickered gayly on the golden frames of two little paintings on the wall, and touched with rose the white glimmer of the piano's ivory keys.

After a little a quiet fell on the group before Jerry's pitch-pine fire, and the crackling murmur of the flames, the ticking of the little clock, and Tom Quartz' sleepy purring took the place of the lively conversation that had been briskly carried on all the afternoon. Hearts and brains were busy with memories and hopes and dreams; and because there were more

who were young than old in the fire-lit, low-raftered room, there were more hopes than memories, more dreams of the future than dreams of the past.

"I wonder where we'll all be and what we'll be doing next Thanksgiving Day," mused Don, aloud, breaking the silence at last.

"I hope we'll be right here where we are now," said Jerry. "The Robin's Nest and present company are good enough for me for some time to come."

"I'm quite of Jerry's mind, provided that my little girl is with us then, as I hope she will be," said Mr. Abbott.

"We all hope that," said Robin, with a look of gratitude and affection at Cicely's father.

"Yeste'day I thought I was dretful homesick for old Summerville, and if it hadn't been for Henry, I don't know but I'd have picked up and gone, but now I feel's if Summerville had come to me, and I think like's not I'm the happiest old woman in Californy! And if Henry ain't satisfied ——"

"I be — I be!" Henry hastened to declare. "There ain't a blame thing in the world I want that I ain't got." And he looked at his gray-haired bride of a year with such pointed admiration that she blushed like a girl — unless the glow on her cheeks was caused by the fresh avalanche of pitch-pine that Jerry had just thrown on the fire.

"There's only one thing I'd like besides what we've got," said Maggie. "If gran'pa was here ——"

"That's just what I was thinkin', Missy!" said Larry Jukes, softly. "An' I've been wonderin' whether I wouldn't likely be movin' on to where he's gone before another Thanksgivin' Day."

"Nonsense, Uncle Larry! You're good for ten years yet!" maintained Jerry, stoutly.

"Let's not even think of sad things, to-night," implored Robin. "I want to be just happy after such a happy day."

Don understood what the little catch in his sister's voice meant, for he, too, had been remembering that on last Thanksgiving Day their father had been with them, and he hastened, for her sake, to change the subject.

"I'll tell you what Jerry and I'll be doing a year from now," he remarked. "We'll be boning for all we're worth for college. I think I can be ready to go two years from last October, if we've got ahead enough then to afford it, and if Jerry tends to his knitting he can enter the next year. Of course we'll have to work and help pay our way as we go. There are plenty of chances for fellows that want to do that."

Jerry seconded this plan with an "Of course!" noticeably lacking in enthusiasm.

"And I'm to go to boarding school in San Francisco," said Maggie, mournfully. "I know I'll hate it, but Robin says she went in Boston and liked it, and I'm sure I do want to know everything in the world, the way Robin does."

Every one laughed at this unqualified compliment, and then John Forrest spoke up from the corner where he had been sitting, quietly enjoying the conversation.

"Seems to me you unfeeling youngsters are all planning to run away and leave the Robin's Nest in two or three more years. What's going to become of your sister, then, I'd like to know?"

"'And what will poor Robin do then, poor thing?'" sang Jerry, cheerfully.

"She can go along and keep house for us at Berkeley or Palo Alto, or wherever we decide to go. Can't you, Robin?"

"Or she might stay up here and keep the Robin's Nest open, so we could spend our vacations here and have the home all ready to come back to when we've got this tiresome college business off our hands."

"That would be a nice scheme!" commented Don, indignantly. "Do you really think I'd let Robin stay up here all alone, nine months of the year? If I thought you meant it, Jerry, I'd thrash you!"

"She'd be very welcome to come up to the mine and live with us, wouldn't she, Mrs. Smith?" said Mr. Abbott. "Cicely would be delighted to come home and find you there, Miss Robin. She's always wished she had a sister."

Robin listened, much amused, to these various plans, and said no word. But presently, while her family and friends were still too busy disposing

of her future to notice what she was doing, she turned to some one who sat not far from her hammock and gave him a look that brought him to her side.

"What is it?" he whispered, bending over her.

"Let's tell them now. It will be easier to do it in the firelight, before the lamps have been lighted. And I can't be quite happy till Don and Jerry know."

"As you wish, dear," he replied, straightening himself suddenly, with a look on his face that drew the eyes of everybody in the room to him before he had said a word.

And then occurred the last and greatest sensation of that exciting day. For before the astonished eyes of the assemblage — if Mr. Abbott didn't look startled, no one noticed it — John Forrest was holding Robin's hand fast in his own, and saying, with a smile at once boyish and manly on his handsome face:—

"Shall I tell you what 'poor Robin' is going to do then — when you all go away and leave her?" And as he went on, though his words were light, the voice that spoke them vibrated with earnestness: "She's going to 'hide her head under *my* wing,' and it's going to be the chief aim of my life to see that no one shall ever have occasion to add 'poor thing!' when they mention her having done so!"

It took a minute or two for the great news contained in this short speech to penetrate fully into

the minds of his hearers. Then there arose a considerable hub-bub of questions and exclamations and hand-shaking and the like. But there was one person who didn't say a word when he kissed his sister, and who bolted into the kitchen presently and stood there in the dim light that stole in from the next room, looking moodily out of the window into the blackness of the night.

Robin missed him at once, and as soon as she could slip away without being noticed, she followed. He heard her light step behind him, but did not turn till he felt her arms around his neck and her cheek against his shoulder.

"Don — dear Don! I'll never marry him in the world if you don't want me to!" she cried repentantly. "I don't know why I needed to fall in love with him, anyway, when I had you, but I couldn't seem to help it."

Don had to laugh at that, and he made a desperate and fairly successful effort to choke down the lump in his throat.

"It's all right, Sissy — don't think I'm kicking. He's an awfully good chap, and I suppose if you hadn't fallen in love with him you would have done some time with some one else."

"Never!" cried Robin, with conviction.

"It's just that I felt a little as if the ground had dropped out from under me," Don explained. "I dare say it was selfish of me, but I'd got it into my head that you and I would always stick together,

and have a home of our own, even if Jerry wandered off."

"But you may marry, yourself, Don, when you're a few years older. Hadn't that ever occurred to you?"

But Don had no misgivings on that score.

"I'm quite sure I never shall. I don't care for girls — except you and Maggie, of course."

Robin smiled to herself in the dark at this cool dismissal of matrimony from among the possibilities of her brother's future.

"Well, brother mine, whether you don't or whether you do, be very sure of one thing, always. You and Jerry will never be one bit less dear to your sister than you always have been, and nothing — *nothing* shall ever come between us. My home is always to be your home, and if John Forrest doesn't want to marry my whole family, he shan't marry me!"

Perhaps the last part of this declaration was addressed less to Don than to somebody who had come quietly in search of the absentees, and who was standing beside them.

"But I *do* want to marry the whole family!" he protested pleadingly. "I've been awfully alone in the world ever since I was a little lad, and there's more than room enough in my heart for a couple of brothers and a little sister, as well as for a wife." His hand was on Don's shoulder now. "Don, old fellow, won't you take my word for it, that I'd rather live alone and lonely all my life than to rob you and

Jerry of the least fraction of your sister's love? We can't be completely happy till you've told us you're satisfied, brother!"

Don groped for some graceful words in which to assure them that he was, but he could find none, and had to content himself with wringing John Forrest's hand fraternally.

"I guess we'll call it square," he declared. "Come on — let's go back. They're calling us, and I don't want them to think I'm playing baby."

"Where were you, Robin?" cried Jerry, as his sister reappeared. "We've been waiting for you to come and play for us. You haven't tried the piano yet, you know."

"What do you want me to play?" asked Robin.

"Something appropriate to the occasion — 'Hail Columbia' or the 'Bridal Chorus' from 'Lohengrin,'" suggested Jerry.

Without answering him, save by a smile, Robin crossed the room and sat down at the instrument. All grew quiet as they waited, and for the second time that evening there was no other sound in the room than the ticking of the clock and the murmur of the flames that wreathed Jerry's backlog.

"Shall I light the lamps now?" asked Don, as he stood by his sister's side.

But Robin shook her head. "I don't need them, dear."

Then, very softly and tenderly she touched the ivory keys that had lain silent so long. And as

the simple, familiar, old-time melody filled the quiet, fire-lit room, there was not one among her listeners who questioned that Robin had chosen the song of all most fitted to the time and place.

It was Larry's sweet, cracked old voice that first took up the words, and one by one the others joined softly in the refrain:—

"'Home — home —
Sweet, sweet home!
Be it ever so humble,
There's no place like home!'"

And as they sang, the mellow glow of the fire rested warmly on the faces of young and old; touched with mildness and benignity the stern features of Great-grandfather Sturtevandt; and ever returned to play lovingly about the two beautiful portraits that smiled quietly down from their golden frames, seeming to breathe a voiceless blessing on this home that had been founded among the western hills, and on all who lingered to-night by its glowing hearth, in the light of the pitch-pine fire.

THE END

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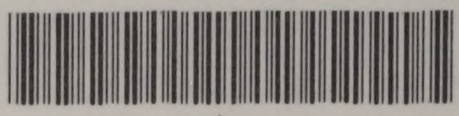

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